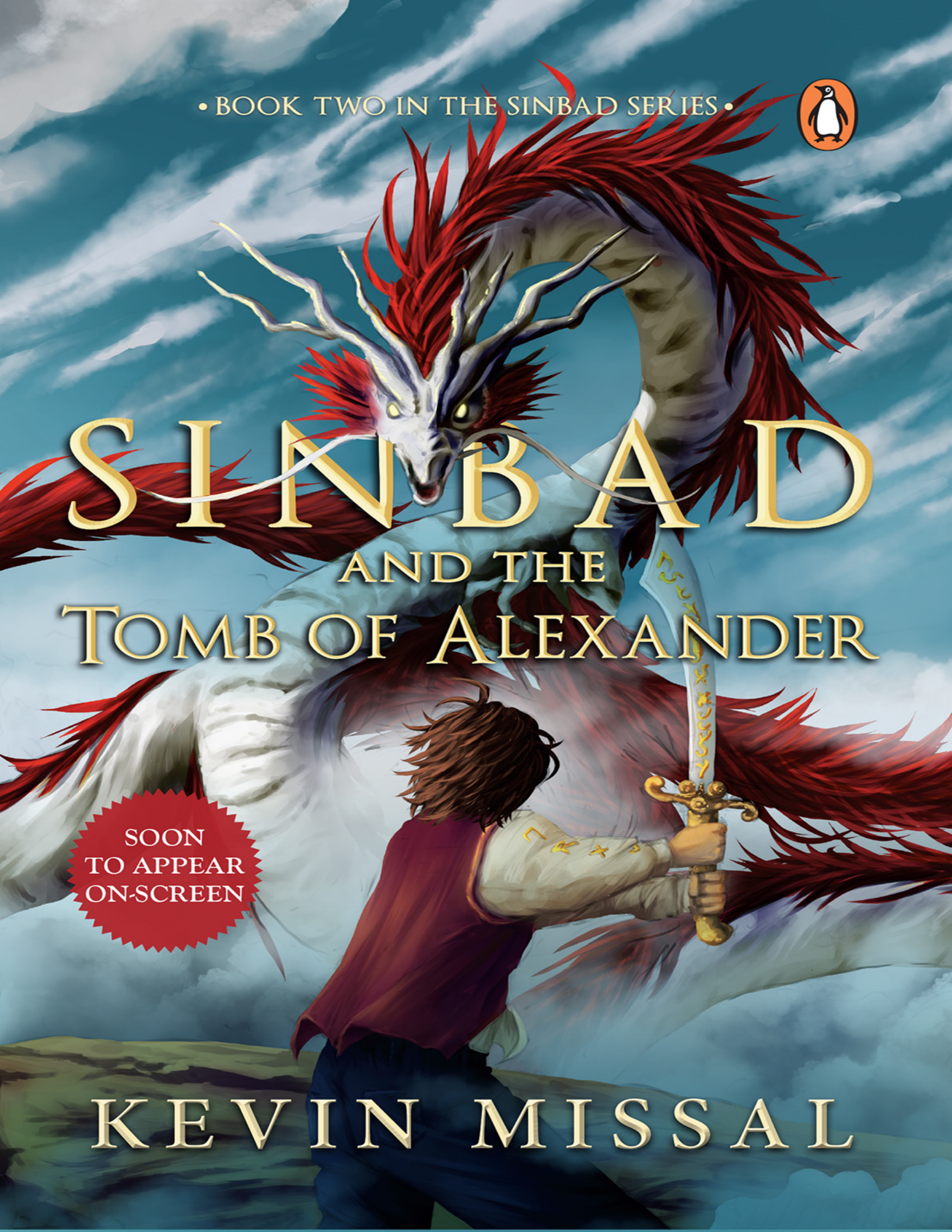
• BOOK TWO IN THE SINBAD SERIES •
SINBAD
AND THE
TOMB OF ALEXANDER
SOON
TO APPEAR
ON-SCREEN
KEVIN MISSAL

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KEVIN MISSAL

SINBAD AND THE TOMB OF ALEXANDER

PENGUIN BOOKS

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SINBAD AND THE TOMB OF ALEXANDER

Kevin Missal, a graduate of St. Stephen’s College, is a TedX speaker and an author of national acclaim. His bestselling series, the *Kalki* trilogy, was termed as ‘2017’s mythological phenomenon’ by the Sunday Guardian. He has also written the *Narasimha* trilogy, *Raavanputr Meghnad* and *Karna*, and these have cumulatively sold 200,000 copies. Kevin has also established his own marketing agency called HubHawks that caters to authors and publishers. He immensely enjoys the look on people’s faces when they find out that he’s done all of this at the age of twenty-five. Kevin resides in Gurugram in a library that he lovingly calls ‘my room’. When he’s not reading or writing, he loves to watch movies and interact with his readers on his social media handles (Instagram: kevin_9695 and Twitter: kevin_missal).

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Also in Penguin by Kevin Missal

Sinbad and the Trumpet of Israfil

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Dedicated to my crew at HubHawks.

All my insecurities, frustrations and successes as the captain of our ship is displayed in excess in this book.

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ONE

Sinbad had done a lot of reckless things in this life. But nothing compared to what he was planning to do right now.

‘Are you sure about this?’ Husayn asked indignantly as he wrapped the bandages around Sinbad’s bloody knuckles. ‘There are a million other ways to go about it, and yet you’ve chosen the one that puts your life at risk. I mean, being beaten at the hands of a human . . . You’ll be the first monster hunter to be killed by his own race.’

Sinbad was looking like a washed-up boxer, with a scarlet nose and a scarred face. He was taking part in a tavern’s brawn competition—a fist fight of sorts.

Why was he here? Good question.

‘Did you make the wager?’ Sinbad inquired about the bet that was supposed to take place between Husayn and the jailer of the Baghdad prison. ‘We have one chance here. We have already got everyone to respect us there. Even the jailer would have never bet on us if he didn’t trust us. But since we proved we are a bunch of lowlifes—’

Husayn cut him short. ‘Ever since we came here, you asked me to keep betting, and you know how much I love to

gamble. But tell me, how does it help us? And even if you win the wager, what will you do then?'

People were hooting now, shouting in the small semicircle where they stood. Sinbad had finished five fights till now and was ready to go for one more.

'I take his carriage.'

'And how does that help?'

'That little kleptomaniac gnome that we had managed to conjure up informed me that the jailer has a secret compartment underneath the floorboards of the carriage. There lies the key to the prison sewer gates.' Sinbad grinned matter of factly. 'So, we enter the prison and release Idris's husband. Simple.'

Husayn pulled the bandage a little too tightly. 'Don't you think he'll take the key with him before handing us the carriage *if* you happen to win this last combat?'

'Of course he will.'

Husayn stared at him.

'But I have a plan for that,' Sinbad smiled.

'What is it?' Husayn groaned. He had come late in the game, and Sinbad, it seemed, had already mapped out everything.

Sinbad indicated the jailer, who was currently grinning like a buffoon while being sweet-talked by his gorgeous teammate, the vampire Ashrafiyah—she was using her magic to woo him. The jailer was plump, had red cheeks and looked awfully like he would be victim to a particular sin called sloth.

'Oh, I see,' Husayn said, nodding. 'Get him to partake in drinking and before he even thinks of taking the key, you'll be long gone.'

'You should be in planning meetings more often, my dear friend.'

‘Oh, c’mon! You came up with that plan just a few hours ago, while I was in the loo, for the sake of my seven love lives. And just to be clear, before this great plan, you had the amazing idea of burgling the bloody House of Wisdom and creating a distraction so that Idris could enter the prison to rescue her husband.’ Husayn rolled his eyes.

The young monster hunter shrugged. ‘It was before I conjured the gnome just so that I could get all the intel I needed. Conjuring can be handy, you know? Now’—he turned around to look at the small arena where greasy men and sultry damsels were hooting in a circle—‘I plan to win this fight. I hope it isn’t some dear old mugger like last time.’

Husayn sighed. ‘You know, you aren’t going to win Safeena’s heart by doing all this. We all know why you chose *this* plan. It makes you look like a hero.’

Sinbad narrowed his eyes and glared at Husayn incredulously. ‘Win her heart? She . . . she’s the one who likes—’

‘Oh really?’

‘Oh yes. *She* likes me.’

But Sinbad knew what he was insinuating. Husayn was one of his closest and truthful friends. He was, in fact, the only friend Sinbad had when he was deported to the scum town of Basra, right after killing his master. Husayn knew what was going on in his head, for most part, and was generally kind-hearted. For many reasons, Sinbad had never trusted any human as he believed they were untrustworthy and shrewd, except for Husayn.

‘All right then,’ Husayn placidly added. ‘She told you she “wants to be just friends”, but have you forgotten the endless sobs I overheard in the captain’s lodge right after she told you this?’

Sinbad shrugged. ‘That wasn’t about me. It was because of someone else . . .’ he mumbled. ‘She’s gone through a lot. And being the chivalrous man I am, I understand that it makes sense to be just friends with her . . . She has a lot on her mind at the moment. Frankly, I’m shocked and appalled that my best friend and dear comrade would judge me like this. I shall never—’

‘She’s not here by the way so you can save the speech,’ Husayn just snapped him shut.

Sinbad felt a churning in his lower belly—a feeling he cared not to share. ‘Ah, I wouldn’t say I’m not disappointed. But this mission? This is for our dear friend Idris.’

Sinbad slumped back to the arena, shoulders drooping. He stepped forward, his eyes fixed on Ashrafiyah, who was still flirting with the jailer.

Ashrafiyah, with her onyx hair and emerald eyes, was someone Sinbad greatly admired. A vampire of sorts and a sorceress too, she could charm anything or anyone under the sun, even a treacherous snake. Her only drawback was that in all her hundreds of years she had never been a team player—that is until a few months ago, when Sinbad showed her the importance of having a family and friends that actually cared, and in ways, this could be empowering too rather than running independent all the time.

The others in their new group—Idris, Safeena, Pressa and Markus—were back at the motel.

Sinbad made his way to the arena. There was now a new announcer, who shouted, ‘We welcome the star of the evening, the winner of four fights, the one whom if you bet on, shall make you tenfold—the great, the adventurous Sinbad the Sailor!’

Sinbad halted and then snuggled up to the announcer. ‘Erm, it’s um . . . Sinbad the World-Saving, Roc-Killing,

Demon-Hunting Sailor.’

‘Kid, I don’t get paid enough to say all that,’ the announcer grunted.

Resigned, Sinbad entered the arena, his eyes fixed ahead of him, where the new opponent was about to enter from. *Who’s it gonna be?* Sinbad thought to himself, pushing his dark hair off his forehead. He had already combatted the biggest and baddest foes, and if fates now went against his route, he would end up having to fighting someone who was the worst of all.

Whatever the challenge, he was ready. After all, he was a strapping boy, over six feet tall, with a brawny powerful body.

The announcer cleared his throat. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I invite a late entrant—The Hunter.’

Everyone fell silent.

The Hunter? For the love of seas and seaweed, Sinbad hoped it wasn’t some large, scary man, wearing a skeleton costume. Not because he wouldn’t be able to beat him, but because that would be terribly cliched.

From the crowd emerged The Hunter, bringing shivers down Sinbad’s spine.

Sinbad growled under his breath as he looked at the ex-head of Adam’s Children, the cult of extremist vampire hunters, dedicated to wipe out the race. Their last meeting had been anything but sweet as Sinbad had found out that they had been betrayed by him.

The Hunter smiled. ‘Hello there, old friend.’

‘Brother Cain.’

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TWO

‘It’s *you*,’ Sinbad whispered, the hooting and chanting from the spectators filling his ears.

Brother Cain laughed. ‘I heard you were here, hiding from the caliphate. Ironic, isn’t it? You saved the world, yet here you are being branded as a pirate and a criminal.’

‘Well, I tried my best,’ Sinbad clenched his jaw, ‘but I guess it doesn’t always work out. There *is* a silver lining, though. All this infamy brought you here to me.’

Cain smiled back. ‘Aren’t you afraid the caliphate’s soldiers will catch hold of you, since you’re using your real name?’

‘Everyone thinks I am still at sea, and no one would believe the drunken buffoons of a tavern, would they? That too one that is situated miles and miles away from the city of Baghdad. Only an *idiot* would believe that—oh! And here *you* are.’

Cain ground his teeth, his red lips highlighted in the dim setup. ‘Word gets around, dear old friend. In fact, I was around Baghdad itself for some private work,’ he rasped, defensively, ‘and I couldn’t believe it when I heard the

rumour—that this local tavern here was housing my lovely pal.’

‘I have a hard time believing that a coincidence led you here. And we’re anything but friends.’ Sinbad circled around, as Brother Cain did the same.

He looked young as he was half-vampire. His eyes steely on a rough gaunt face.

‘I think a brush with death can bond two people, don’t you think?’ Cain said.

‘Yeah, well, I don’t know which weird books, you read these things in.’

‘Fight! Fight! Fight!’ someone shouted. ‘Stop chit-chatting!’

Cain suddenly came forward with a fast punch, but Sinbad saw it coming and deflected it with his elbow, reaching for a quick knockout on the stomach. Cain bellowed with pain and landed a sharp knee strike on Sinbad’s thigh, forcing him to his knees. The half-vampire punched Sinbad in the face, and he fell over, spitting out blood.

‘Because of you, Sinbad, I had to suffer horrible wounds. I was hounded by my brethren who discovered my truth—a half-vampire! Because of you I have been scavenging and searching for help, for so long, and I had no idea what to do . . . until I realized . . . I had to kill you.’

He kicked Sinbad in the guts.

‘And whatever you are planning here, I have come to expose you.’

He kicked again and again.

But Sinbad had had enough. He grabbed hold of Cain’s foot and twisted it. The half-vampire fell to the floor too, as Sinbad scurried forward and grabbed him in an arm lock, pressing against his larynx. ‘This time, I’ll make sure you die.’

‘I’m not that easy,’ Cain rasped.

He bit Sinbad’s arm, so tightly and harshly that Sinbad felt the half-vampire’s serrated teeth puncturing his skin. A searing pain rushed through him. He pulled back, struggling, his arm bleeding. Fortunately for him, and contrary to popular belief, vampires cannot turn anybody into one of their own just through a bite. You must first be killed and then resurrected with vampire blood.

Cain wiped the blood from his mouth and hurtled himself at Sinbad, who rolled over on his side.

‘How did you *really* know I was here?’ Sinbad groaned. He had to find out.

‘My employer keeps a check on potential obstacles.’ Cain stood up, ready to fight again. ‘He didn’t want me to come here, but I discovered your location and had to take my vengeance.’

Employer?

‘And here I thought,’ Cain continued, ‘that you were wandering about alone. Tch, tch!’ He laughed, looking at Ashrafiyah, who had grown pale. She had once been close to him, until he backstabbed her for his own gains.

He looked at Sinbad. ‘You know, people like me find people like my employer, or the other way around. My employer had a hunch that I was strong enough to fight you and your ragtag team.’ He grimaced and threw a punch, but this time Sinbad knelt and headbutted him in the abdomen. A low groan escaped Cain and he coughed hard, trying to catch his breath.

‘Who is this employer of yours?’ Sinbad asked again.

‘If only I were willing to tell you. But if you think *you* know what you are doing, he’s already done it. He’s a master strategist, a secret player, a man who works in shadows and has motives that run deeper than your blood.’

‘That’s quite an introduction.’

Cain let out a raspy chuckle. ‘He’s called the Lame Devil.’

Sinbad raised his brows. ‘Yeah, everything just went downhill with that godawful name.’

‘Better than Sinbad the Sailor,’ Cain snarled.

‘Mine has personality to it. Once I beat you, go back and tell your employer that I saved the world. The last thing I want is an enemy with a weird, wussy name trying to spy on me.’

Cain pounced at Sinbad, pushing him to the ground and striking his face, when a dart hit his neck.

He fell to the side, foam spilling out of his mouth. For a moment, a deathly silence fell over the crowd, before they began running frantically.

Sinbad narrowed his gaze as he looked at the dart; surely it was dipped in poison, with Cain’s jugular being the target. His eyes scanned the room, looking for who shot it. A shadow wearing a cowl rushed outside. Tufts of bright red hair caught Sinbad’s eyes.

Sinbad ran, chasing the figure, pushing himself against the screaming crowd. Husayn and Ashrafiyah followed him. He exited the tavern, but the figure had disappeared.

Sinbad sighed. ‘Oh dear, I believe our friend said too much too soon.’ The employer clearly wanted to keep the knowledge of his existence a secret.

‘I don’t believe in gods, my love,’ Ashrafiyah said, ‘but thanks to them that bloody awful man has died.’

‘Umm . . . we have another problem, Sinbad,’ Husayn added. ‘Since you didn’t *technically* defeat Cain, I lost the wager.’

‘But the jailer’s drunk enough to give it to us,’ Ashrafiyah reassured Husayn. ‘Don’t worry. He’s so drunk, he’s calling me Loretta.’

Husayn signalled in the corner where the stocky jailer with red cheeks was being pulled away from the tavern and into the very important carriage that they had their eyes on.

‘Then why is he being assisted to go home by his very sober guards?’

Sinbad scowled. ‘I have a plan.’

‘What is it?’

He had said it before and he would say it again. ‘I’ll figure it out.’

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THREE

‘Well!’ Husayn threw his hands up. ‘How do you plan to improvise?’

People were still shouting and scurrying out of the tavern, terrified. No one there had seen such a horrific death play out before their eyes.

But this was a daily thing for Sinbad.

‘The carriage is moving farther away as you think,’ Husayn added.

‘All right, all right! I’m looking for a way.’ Sinbad’s eyes rested on the horses in front of him, which were tied to the wooden poles. ‘I think I’m going the old-fashioned route,’ he said.

‘Old fashioned is boring.’ Ashrafiyah grinned and snapped her fingers.

A sudden blur threw itself out of the tavern. All the eyes of the bystanders and the rollicking tavern drunkards landed on it.

It was a carpet—a flying one.

‘Is that carpet levitating?’ Sinbad asked incredulously, staring at the Persian rug.

It was as if the carpet heard him, for it jerked.

‘Did the carpet just wave at me?’ Husayn asked. The carpet seemed to giggle, shaking and lifting up a front corner to an imagined mouth. ‘Does . . . does she like me?’

Ashrafiyah rolled her eyes. ‘I animated it. Thought I’d steal it before getting out of here,’ she explained. ‘Even inanimate objects have souls, a history. If you tap into them through magic, you can ask them to return to their animate form. It is the possession’s choice to do so.’

‘And it chose to be alive?’ Husayn asked, gaping.

‘Yeah. And it finds you cute.’ She winked.

Sinbad didn’t have time for this banter. ‘Thank you!’ he said to the rug, jumping onto it. ‘To the carriage!’

The carpet saluted with one edge of the flowery end and then began to speed towards the carriage, leaving behind Husayn, Ashrafiyah and the tavern.

The night seemed young, the clouds hung low in the sky and the stars shone brightly on Sinbad.

‘Oh, come on! Faster!’

And the carpet did, swinging through the dark streets of the town. Sinbad’s eyes darted around him—he knew he had no plan.

I can do it. I’ve improvised so often.

Though this time, it was scarier than normal. For one, he was on a carpet that had no sides or handles; he could just topple and fall at breakneck speed. Sinbad held on to the edges as tightly as possible.

‘Just closer. Just a bit more!’

The carriage was moving as swiftly as possible, the two guards in the front whipping the horses. Just as he inched closer, they turned to look at him, their mouths agape and their eyes growing wide. While one held the reins of the

stallions, the other unsheathed a scimitar and made a move aimed at Sinbad . . .

Who pulled on the other, sharp edge of the sword quite recklessly and swung to the side, while returning close to the carriage. Thanks to the cloth wrapped around his hand for the fighting match, the blade didn't pierce his skin.

Another sweep of the blade made its way towards him, but this time, instead of dodging, Sinbad kicked the attacker's wrist. The man screeched as the blade fell from his hand. This was his chance—Sinbad swooped to grab hold of it and swung it at the guard, scarring his arm as he fell from the carriage.

The other guard at the reins hollered to a man inside, who came rushing out with a sword.

'Who are you?' he shouted, as he climbed to the top of the carriage, leaping out and grabbing the edge of the carpet, all the while swinging the blade.

Sinbad swerved as he hurtled himself forwards towards the guard.

'I knew a man who could do the same trick on a carpet,' said the guard. 'He carried a lamp with him, and he was an absolute idiot.'

They both balanced themselves on the carpet while it moved, racing against the carriage, as they combated with swords.

'Ah, well, I'm sure he has a story to tell, but my stories are better.' Sinbad grinned and swiftly moved to the side as the man came closer, punching his back. He then shoved the guard off the carpet, but the man caught the edge as he slipped, letting it tear. The carpet instantly jerked and began bucking like a wild horse.

Sinbad groaned. 'Just what I needed.' He began to shout words of consolation, but the carpet swooped towards the

twinkling stars, away from the carriage.

‘Wrong direction! Wrong direction!’

It tried to go upside down and left and right, as Sinbad grabbed the edges, holding it desperately and trying to save the life that he held dearly on to.

‘I’m sorry! It won’t happen again.’ He patted the carpet when it calmed down and started moving towards the carriage again, which was getting closer to the gates of Baghdad.

He couldn’t let the carriage reach the impenetrable city—he would be caught and punished for using a bloody magical carpet in front of naked human eyes. Sinbad could see the dome-shaped fortresses, palaces and mosques, and the beautiful skyline of Baghdad, with its long towers and bricked walls, mosaic colours of dark red, blue and yellow.

I’m close.

Sinbad reached the carriage. It was the time for daring. ‘Thank you so much. You can rest now,’ he said to the carpet, patting it gently. He jumped over to the carriage, clumsily hitting the ground. He clung on to the door that had swung open. His body lifted off the ground and trailed beside the carriage as he held on.

The plump jailer, who had just about realized what was going on, was now trying to snap himself back to sobriety. As the door flapped open again, the jailer spotted Sinbad and let out a high-pitched scream. He jumped from the carriage as if he had seen the devil himself and landed with a thud on the ground.

Do I look that hideous?

Sinbad’s intention was to get the key and do the same, but the guard with the reins moved closer to the door from which Sinbad was clumsily hanging. He grinned and began to slice at the door with his curved blade. Sinbad dodged his

attacks as he lurched and jumped inside the cabin. The guard tried to puncture the inside of the cabin, lashing at it with the sword, but Sinbad swerved.

‘Ah, you can’t catch me!’ he cried out, laughing, but just then the sword made contact with the fabric of his tunic and tore it apart. Sinbad contorted his face in frustration and leapt ahead, passing the puncture holes of the worn-down cabin. He held one part of the fabric of the tent-shaped top and pulled it down forcefully, where the guard was. Sinbad had a sword in his hand, and now they both fought, kicking each other.

‘Your master has left you to die,’ Sinbad yelled.

‘No, I told him to do so.’ The guard grinned again and jumped from the carriage.

Confused, Sinbad looked ahead and saw the horses moving towards the walls of Baghdad.

Oh, for the love of voyages!

Sinbad grabbed hold of the steep stairs to the carriage’s front and jumped on top. He took hold of the horses’ reins, steering the mad animals away from the city walls.

But he heard something snap. The wheels skidded, and the hefty ropes that held the horses loosened, pushing the carriage downhill. Sinbad flung himself as far from the carriage as he could, right before it went tossing and tumbling downhill along with the horses. He went crashing down a mound of dry grass and tumbleweed, rolling over dirt, detritus and . . .

Swine.

‘Who the seven hells keeps a farm next to the city?’ he groaned as he saw the mess.

It seemed like a small farm that housed pigs, a few farmhands and a house, which was now in shambles as the carriage had crashed right into it.

At least I've saved myself from the clutches of the caliphate.

Sinbad rested calmly on the ground, frustrated that this great adventure hadn't gone better. The farmer, by then, had spotted Sinbad, while the pig next to Sinbad grunted and licked his face.

'You better pay for this!' shouted the farmer, pointing to his house and farm.

Sinbad nodded. 'Yes, sure, sure.' He tried to steady himself on his feet, wiping away the dirt and the mud while he patted the swine. 'You're the only one who looks at me with such kindness.'

He moved towards the now ramshackle carriage, ignoring the farmer's further cries. He was glad the horses had escaped this mess—they must have made a run for the desert. He carefully avoided the splinters as he rummaged through the spilled contents of the carriage. He knocked on plenty of planks until he found the elusive key he was looking for.

Sinbad stepped out of the wreckage with a sigh of relief, but the farmer continued to berate him.

'Yes, yes, do not worry. I'll get you that money as soon as someone pays me for saving the world on multiple occasions.'

Now he just had to figure out how to return to the town. He should have tried to save one horse for the ride back, but since he couldn't, he just looked into the distance as the loving swine proceeded to lick him.

But his scheming went into despair when he saw dozens of horses galloping towards him. He should have been glad for the horses that were here when he needed, but they were ridden by men, with one holding aloft the silk flag of the Abbasid caliphate. You couldn't miss the flag—black with

a golden moon in the centre. Just behind the convoy was a very angry fat man yelling at the guards, ‘It’s him! It’s him! He was trying to steal my carriage with his flying carpet and dark sorcery,’ yelled the jailer. ‘He goes by the name of Sinbad the Sailor.’

Sinbad sighed. *He must have got these guards from the gates.*

He looked at the men in their helmets and armour and said, ‘It’s actually Sinbad the World-Saving, Roc-Killing, Demon-Hunting . . . oh, who am I kidding?’ He knew he was going to prison, probably where Idris’s husband was imprisoned. ‘It’s just Sinbad the Sailor.’

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FOUR

Sinbad had been to prison many times, and other than the rotting smell of corpses, greasy walls and stinky pipes, he really appreciated the time it gave him for introspection.

Life was fast for the young sailor. Just the other day he had planned to save Idris's husband and now here he was—himself imprisoned. And just a few months ago, he had saved the world, but unfortunately, no one even knew about it. He at least expected the monster-hunting fanatics at the Ninurta Guild or the Hunters Guild, as the commoners called it to appreciate him. But nah.

On the contrary, they branded him as a traitor and accused him of treason and going against the caliphate. In fact, the Ninurta Guild went so far as to say that the whole world-saving business was a lie. It was all a hoax. It was not real. Even the caliphate's seer, Zarqa, who had predicted it, was deemed a liar.

All because the guild didn't do anything about it but sit on their rears and sip Madeira.

People respected the guild, so, in short, Sinbad was ostracized, no longer a Seid—a hunter, so to speak. He was

now a sailor, a criminal and—the worst—a pirate!

But the journey he had taken months ago was one of revelation, especially regarding the people around him. The friends he made had now become family. Even the love of his life was on his ship, and though she was being distant, at least she was still alive. When he thought about it, being distant was probably for the best, given that she was a doomsday device, born from the limb of an actual devil—Shaitan—commonly known as Iblis, the Lord of the Dawn.

Sinbad was lying on the floor, looking up at the leaky red-brick ceiling as ideas flooded his head. He had to escape. He knew his crew was already planning something to get him out, but he also had to come up with a plan himself.

He scanned the deepest recesses of his mind for clues, when one memory suddenly jumped out, misplaced. Right before Sinbad had killed his enemy during his previous adventure, Azrael, the Black-winged One or the fallen angel, had told Sinbad that he knew about his parents. As someone who had been indoctrinated into the Ninurta Guild as a small child and then got his memory wiped, Sinbad certainly wanted to know who his parents were.

Where are they now? What are they doing? Are they even alive?

But before he could brood over these questions, the guard, wearing an ivory breastplate, knocked on the grills of his cell.

‘Recreation time!’ he shouted.

‘What’s that?’

‘That’s when you step out of your bloody cell for a while.’

‘How long do you plan for me to stay here?’ Sinbad asked. ‘Don’t I get a fair trial, a face-to-face chat with the caliphate’s court?’

‘They told us to wait until they finish discussing you.’

Oh, great. Discussion isn't ever good.

Sinbad stepped out of the cell and joined a line of prisoners twice his size who were all staring at him. He clenched his jaw as he moved farther, his eyes searching for Emir. For all he knew, Idris's husband looked like an ordinary man, but he also had pale skin, pointy teeth and golden eyes—probably like a Strigoi, or a vampire.

This isn't an ordinary prison, Sinbad noticed, *but one where monsters are kept*. Here, there was a spell in the air that repelled the magic of witches and warlords. There were goblins too and werewolves, but in prison clothes. There were elves as well, the naughty kind, and tiny fairies manacled by even tinier chains.

It seemed Sinbad, too, was considered a monster, even though he was human, probably because he was an ex-Seid, someone who was capable of things beyond the normal human stuff.

He remembered the words of his slain master. 'We live so long hunting monsters that we become them . . . in the end.'

Sinbad strolled towards the recreation area, an open space where tables and chairs were placed. Light filtered through the open ceiling. The guards were lined up against the marbled walls. Most of them were Seids, Sinbad noticed, wearing long crimson tunics having all kinds of spells embroidered on them, carrying staffs and donning hats. One couldn't miss them or even mess with any of them, thanks to the scary stone-like expression pasted on their faces.

Accepting his situation for the time being, Sinbad decided to find out if Emir was housed in the prison. The other prisoners shrugged, shook their heads or grunted, but finally someone pointed Sinbad to a man in the corner. He sat in

silence, leaning against the wall with his head lowered. A deathly vibe emanated from him.

Sinbad approached him and muttered awkwardly, ‘Umm . . . I am Sinbad, Idris’s friend.’

The man looked up, his pale eyes emotionless. ‘Id . . . Idris?’ he whispered. His skin was cracked and his lips dry. A drool dropped from the side of his mouth.

No!

It looked like his brain had been subjected to shock spells that had made him immobilized. Sinbad swallowed as he saw the man’s lifeless eyes and delirious behaviour. *He must have been quite a menace*, Sinbad thought. *They don’t shock you unless you revolt or* really *step out of line.*

‘I know what you’re thinking. It’s depressing.’

Sinbad turned to where the voice had come from to see a werewolf standing behind him. He was tall, with dark fur and pointy ears, and he moved only on his hind legs. Werewolves were not the stereotypical wolves that myths portrayed them to be. In fact, they weren’t even feral, but quite an advanced and intelligent species. Sinbad was always delighted to meet one.

‘Do you know him?’ he asked.

‘Of course. He’s a friend.’ The werewolf had a polished accent that could be traced back to a Roman lineage. ‘He used to be, at least, before they fried his brain when he tried to escape. This place is horrible. Each new day could be your last.’

Sinbad pursed his lips, folding his arms against his chest. ‘Do you think he might come back?’

‘Probably. Maybe. Needs a lot of healing, rare healing, in fact.’

Sinbad nodded thoughtfully.

‘I heard you say the name “Idris”,’ the werewolf said, ‘and apologies for eavesdropping, but I figured who you were inquiring about. Emir used to talk about her all the time.’ He pointed to the man. ‘He wanted to leave this place for her. He used to tell me their story: how she had come to hunt him, but she fell for him as he did for her. What a kind and beautiful romance it had been! They lived in silence, hidden, but Idris one day decided it was best to tell the guild. How bad could it get? But it did. She didn’t get hurt, but he got caught and imprisoned. The guild kept stalling and making her do their dirty work . . . over time it became blackmail.’

Sinbad ground his teeth. ‘I don’t know why she went along with it. She should have just kept her mouth shut.’

‘Hope. She had hope in her people, in the government.’

Sinbad shook his head. It was the last place to have hope in. He knelt down to talk to Emir, but by then, someone had walked over.

‘Looky looky, who do we have here?’

Not again.

Sinbad sighed as he turned back, realizing it must be someone from his long list of enemies who really wanted him dead. But instead of finding a big, scary man, he saw a group of scowling dwarves. They were all about four feet tall and had bushy pumpkin-coloured beards.

‘Hello there,’ Sinbad forced a grin. ‘How do I know you?’

‘You don’t remember me, do you?’ squeaked the dwarf in the middle. ‘I’m your worst nightmare.’

‘Sure you are. But I’m sorry, I don’t remember.’

‘You and your master infiltrated our sandalwood smuggling business and killed my friends.’

‘Oh, did we?’ Sinbad didn’t have the faintest idea what he was talking about. ‘I can’t seem to put a face to the memory.’

‘And he says, he saved the world!’ A roar of laughter came from the other dwarves. ‘We shall barbecue you and feed on you.’

Sinbad sighed; myths spoke about dwarves being great goldsmiths, silversmiths and armourers, but they conveniently left out their cannibalistic nature.

‘Leave us be, little folks,’ the werewolf said. ‘We bring no harm.’

‘Oi, dog! This is between two hairless people, so bugger off, fur.’

Sinbad expected the werewolf to get angry, but he nodded and sloped off.

‘You know, you don’t have to be rude. You can always–’

The smallest dwarf, next to the one who had spoken, lurched at Sinbad with his serrated teeth, ready to devour him. Sinbad dodged and punched him, and the dwarf fell. The other two dwarves now lunged at him and began to bite his legs. Sinbad screamed as his legs throbbed in pain; he kicked them away. His fists punching in several directions.

What fate! The last thing I expected was to fight cannibalistic dwarves in a blasted prison!

Sinbad fell back on the floor as the dwarves began to crowd around him, smacking their lips as if he were breakfast. He squeezed his eyes shut, bracing himself for the attack, but then heard a thunderous clap. A gust of wind blew all the dwarves away, like magic.

He looked up to see a lanky man, a recognizable one, with a long face and an aquiline nose. He had a thin moustache and long ears, from which gold hoops dangled. He was dressed in a multicoloured, ruby-studded gown. This time he was holding a staff, with a glowing orb perched atop it. This was the man who had given Sinbad his last mission to save the world.

‘Nice to meet you again, Sinbad. You have been summoned by Caliph Harun al-Rashid himself,’ Ja’far said.

The caliph?

Oh, this is going to be interesting.

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FIVE

Sinbad walked alongside Ja’far, the head of the Barkamid family, a vizier to Harun al-Rashid, the caliph. Sinbad felt a powerful energy resonating from him. They had travelled from the prison on horseback and then in a carriage to a small fortress of redbrick kiln.

‘I apologize,’ Ja’far said, ‘for whatever happened.’

‘What did happen?’ Sinbad asked coyly.

‘You’re in handcuffs because of me. You would have been considered a hero otherwise.’

‘Ah, well.’

‘I tried to convince the caliph, but he couldn’t do anything about it. The guild has a powerful influence in the epicentres of the caliphate, and he had to brand you as a criminal, despite me giving you the job of saving the world. They didn’t believe there was anything to save. They still don’t believe that Iblis is planning to strike and that he is looking for opportunities.’

‘How is that possible, though? The trumpet was stolen from right in front of their eyes,’ Sinbad spat out, angrily.

‘All these are myths, as they say. They don’t even believe in the cat-eyed lady. They don’t know that she survives,’ Ja’far said. ‘They believe she has died . . . but I’m sure she’s very much out there. If you find her, Sinbad, make sure you bring back her head.’

Sinbad smiled politely, treading carefully with his words. They weren’t to discover that a crew member was the devil’s daughter herself—the infamous cat-eyed girl.

‘They are being naive if they *just* worry about the persistent threat of the cat-eyed girl. You know, I was also that once—artless—while I was in the guild. Comes with the title of Seid,’ smiled Sinbad, sadly.

‘Listen, kid. We don’t plan to kill you,’ Ja’far said. He sounded frustrated and helpless. ‘The good part is no one *knows* Sinbad the Sailor. They just think you’re some random boy spewing random words about the end of the world.’

‘What? That’s not the good part,’ Sinbad cried.

Ja’far smirked. ‘The bad part is the guild has begun to notice that the caliph is cracking. He has been under the influence of me and Zarqa, the seer, and they think he might be a problem eventually. That’s politics. That’s our job. While *you* have a different job.’

Before he could ask, the doors opened widely, and Sinbad saw in front of him a man, around thirty, looking at charts and maps on a large table. He had no turban on, just a tunic with an insignia and a long, saffron sash wrapped around his chest. A thick beard masked part of his handsome face. An attractive Arab boy.

But behind that facade was the most powerful man in this land—the heir of the Abbasid caliphate, the caliph himself—Harun al-Rashid.

Sinbad had heard about the caliph often, but only a lucky few had seen him. He rarely left his fortress. The man never walked around; otherwise, he would have had a thousand admirers and a hundred thousand assassins waiting to pounce on him. Harun al-Rashid had brought the arts, culture, the expansion of trade policies and military discipline like no other ruler in the land of Arabia, building the foundation of the House of Wisdom, which was the largest library in the world.

And yet, the guild had him by the throat because it was ancient organization, and traditionally, no matter how powerful or powerless the guild was, it wouldn't come directly under the caliphate, ever. It was a separate entity, having a mystical, spiritual presence.

The moment Harun looked at Sinbad, he eyed Ja'far. 'Release him, please.'

Ja'far clapped and Sinbad's ropes were let loose, letting him massage his wrists. 'Aaah,' Sinbad moaned.

'Were you bound too hard?' Harun asked.

'No, I've just seen people doing that after being relased.'

Harun shook his head. 'Well, it is a pleasure to meet you, Sinbad. Because of you, we breathe.'

Sinbad couldn't believe the strongest man on the planet was complimenting him.

'When we sent you on the mission last time, the guild was reluctant, thus they sent only one soldier, Idris, with you. But unfortunately for them, you succeeded, and now they consider you a criminal. Even Idris. They want to hang you for converting one of their own. And let's be honest, Sinbad, you have your fair share of trials to attend.' The caliph shuffled through his scrolls, picked out a piece of papyrus and began to read. 'You killed your master. You apparently got paid for your work as a Seid in Bashra when you had to

do it for free. You called upon a Greek god without the permission of the guild. You created a ruckus in Oman with the vampires. And you also happen to have a hand in killing the prized Chinese warrior Tien Shengdong.'

'In all fairness, he was a piece of—'

Harun raised his hand. 'No need to defend yourself. As you can see, you are here with supporters. I'm just listing your transgressions so that you don't repeat them.'

'Oh, I don't plan to make things happen. Things happen to me, unfortunately.'

Harun chuckled.

'Your highness, I am sure you didn't call me here to chit chat about my past deeds . . .'

Harun nodded. 'I plan to take your assistance again.' He moved from his table with a sheet of parchment and handed it to Sinbad. 'This was given to me by one of my military ships. It's been trying to attack the Umayyad pirates.'

Sinbad read it. It talked about a man. A very strange one.

'Unfortunately, only one survivor happened to swim away from the destruction of my dozen fleets.' Harun paused. 'Dozen, yes. This man, or whatever he was, happened to have his own fleet but not of men. Of demons. Of Nephilims and all sorts of strange creatures. They took over an Umayyad pirate fleet too.'

'Nephilim? The army of Iblis.' Sinbad remembered his fight in Shangri-La with them.

Harun nodded. 'This man, he limped, and he had this aura about him . . . He haunted the survivor, who then had a heart failure right after his interrogation.'

'Limped?' Sinbad narrowed his gaze, remembering the conversation he had had with Brother Cain. 'The Lame . . . limped . . . of course!'

'What happened?' Harun asked, confused.

‘I . . . umm, nothing.’ Sinbad didn’t get into it, but he knew that it was the Lame Devil who was behind Brother Cain’s resurrection and killing, as well as behind the caliph’s fleet’s destruction. ‘Why do you think he tried to attack you lot?’ he asked.

‘Because he was looking for maps of the land of Arabia.’

‘That’s strange. He could have got them from any cartographer.’

‘Not the one that holds the secret hideouts of our *important* people,’ Harun specifically pointed out.

‘Ah, important. What kind of important are we talking about?’

‘Researchers, scientists, writers, inventors . . .’ Harun explained. ‘I happened to mark their possible locations on the map myself and had my finest men sail across the seas to check on them, to find out what they are up to. Somehow this limp man got the intel. In the meantime, my men found the location of the Umayyad pirates who have been after us for vengeance, and it was during this encounter that the limping demon entered. He helped the Umayyad, took the maps and burnt the ships—all of them.’

‘He hates you because you support the guild,’ Sinbad explained.

Harun shook his head. ‘According to the survivor he did it purely out of glee. I don’t know what kind of demon we are dealing with, but he sounds possessed.’

Sinbad nodded. ‘Can I see the list?’

‘Unfortunately, we cannot allow that,’ Ja’far intervened, after having quietly listened to the conversation for some time. ‘Security reasons.’

Sinbad rolled his eyes. ‘Of course.’

Harun walked over to his parrot, who was perched on a tall rod, and fed him. He paused before saying, ‘There’s a

small town 500 miles from Baghdad called Nazir. Our men have managed to inform me through pigeons that the multiple towns between here and Nazir have all had strange demon sightings.'

'So you think he's going there, to Nazir?'

Harun nodded.

'And why is that?'

He exchanged a look with Ja'far. 'There's one important person we have tried to conceal and protect, someone who holds crucial knowledge . . . information. I have sent the notice to protect him, but, you see, my men are nothing against magic and demons. They can only stall the enemy till you get there. The guild doesn't like me, so I can't ask for their help. You are my only option . . . and hope.' Harun walked up to Sinbad. He stood so closely that the young Seid could see the almond eyes of the Caliph; they were soft and tender.

'The man I am protecting, he knows where to hide if there's a crisis. There's a canyon five miles from Nazir and'—he pulled out another sheet of parchment with the details of the location—'you can find him there.' He handed over the royal decree too, which had his signature and the official stamp, imprinted in blood. 'Tell him I sent you. Protect him, but more than that, protect the knowledge he holds. The manic demon has something up his sleeve and he's looking for the information for the wrong reason.'

Sinbad held the royal decree; it gave him permission to travel to all the docks and the towns and the cities in Arabia. Basically, a free pass to do anything, and in return—serve the caliphate. *So much for being a classy pirate.*

Sinbad looked up. 'I want something in return.'

'What?' Harun asked, putting his hand on Sinbad's shoulder. 'Gold? Silver? Women? Land?'

‘Sounds tempting, but I want a prisoner to be released. He’s wrongfully convicted . . . he’s a vampire.’

Harun’s eyebrows knitted together. ‘I would have to justify why I’m letting a vampire leave, but leave that to me.’

‘And also,’ Sinbad continued, ‘I want this decree to continue even after we complete our mission, so that we can live freely, not under constant scrutiny.’

Harun reluctantly nodded. ‘As long as I am alive, Sinbad, this will be applicable.’

That didn’t sound reassuring at all to Sinbad, but he was willing to accept it. He’d get another opportunity to save the world. Though he had no idea for what ideals or joy, he was doing this again. He began to leave the room, when he suddenly turned back and asked, ‘Um, sorry, but why is that important person being chased and hunted? And why is he important in the first place?’

Harun glanced again at Ja’far. ‘He’s a researcher, a scribe of sorts. Umara Ibn Zayd. He comes from a long line of researchers, and he was studying a topic that had been kept secret for hundreds of years—something that is said to have gone missing.’

‘And what is that?’

Sinbad almost gasped when Harun said, ‘The tomb of Alexander the Great.’

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SIX

The night should have ended. But it turned into one of the longest of Sinbad’s life.

He was lost in thought when he was escorted out of the palace discreetly and given the necessary documents and a mare to travel.

He had heard about Alexander, the Macedonian king. One of the most powerful rulers to ever exist, he had died at just thirty-two. He was considered a god by his people, someone who would have conquered the whole world. He had never lost a battle thanks to his strategy and sharp wit. According to legend, Alexander was poisoned to death, but despite many searching over the years, his body got lost in the sands of time. No one knew where his final burial place was.

Hearing about such a king, reading about him in the books was one thing, but knowing that one would be chasing the man’s tomb, was another. Sinbad sighed heavily, trying to recall the stories. As per legend, the tomb held many a secrets and ancient knowledge, which apparently now the Lame Devil pursued intently.

Iblis wouldn’t just send one of his lieutenants on a fool’s errand. There has to be an ulterior motive, Sinbad thought while riding his mare.

He now noticed a tall tower, piercing the sky, close to the city gates. Like a beacon.

And while Sinbad looked at the tower, lost in thought, he suddenly noticed a figure standing on top of it, glaring at him with fiery red eyes. A strange energy seemed to be emanating out of them.

The moment he spotted him Sinbad knew who it was.

The figure disappeared just as Sinbad blinked. Just then the streets ahead of him as well the path behind him, filled up with dark smoke.

Sinbad unsheathed his thokcha sword, made of sky iron, ready to dissipate any monster sent for him.

But this wasn’t sent by an enemy. This was sent by a friend.

‘I have never liked your lot,’ Sinbad remarked loudly, letting his voice echo down the now empty street.

The mare began to slowly trot. With his sword close to his chest, Sinbad felt like a chivalrous knight passing through the dark woods. Unfortunately, he lived in the east and there was more sand than—

‘I must question you,’ came a whisper. ‘Answer and you shall be spared.’

The voice had a sharp tinge to it. Any commoner hearing it would have fainted or run for their life, but not a Seid for they knew this kind well. An Ifrit—a genie made out of fire and glass and clay. They were not the wish-granting types, as myths often portrayed. Rather, if you bound them and tamed them, they became good questioners and inquisitors, even slaves, who had shapeshifting powers. They even had powers to create and manipulate elemental energies.

‘Ask away. I can answer everything.’

‘Why did the caliph want to see you?’

‘*That* I can’t answer. I know you are working with the guild and—’

Before he could finish, Sinbad was yanked off his mare. The red-cloaked figure before him threw him high up into the air, beyond the menacing tower, before he came tumbling back down. Sinbad landed on top of the watchtower.

‘Okay, that wasn’t necessary!’ Sinbad cried as he dusted off his tunic.

The Ifrit was clearly visible now. His red eyes glimmered, and his face was gaunt—well, what part of his face remained. He had no jaw, but a ton of ruby-red fiery sparks were obscuring the missing part instead. Usually, Ifrits were contained in deceased human bodies so this must have been a man who had blown apart half of his face.

‘May I ask again?’ The Ifrit brought his fiery talons out front. ‘Tell me why you were summoned?’

‘Just normal chit-chat.’

‘You know I can suck the truth out of you.’

‘That doesn’t sound as scary as you think it does.’

The Ifrit lunged at Sinbad, who jumped onto the floor below, rolling over. He landed in front of a staircase and began to descend quickly when the Ifrit appeared in front of him, coming out of thin, dark smoke. Sinbad gripped the two banisters, pushed himself up in the air, and kicked the demon mid-suspension, almost knocking him down.

He then tried to push the Ifrit off the watchtower by shoving it against the railing by hurtling himself on it, but the creature disappeared in a puff of smoke, only to reappear behind him, ready to strike with his red talons.

Sinbad swung at the talons with his sword just in time.

All this action had Sinbad on the edge now. His heart was throbbing, and his mouth had gone dry. The fiery crackling talons and the heavy dark vibe was proving to be too taxing.

The creature suddenly rammed into Sinbad, who went tumbling over the ledge. He began plummeting through the thick smog but was transported by the Ifrit onto another floor of the tower. The Ifrit now had him pinned to the ground by his throat, its sharp talons right next to Sinbad's eyes.

'Tell me or face my wrath,' the Ifrit sneered.

'I can free you,' Sinbad whispered.

'What?' The creature wasn't expecting this.

'You work with the guild, and I know they don't treat you or any of your kind, right. They turn you into kidnappers and murderers and god knows what. And that's not who you all are. Djinns have always been a kind force, until the evil King Solomon decided to tame you all with his ring.' Sinbad looked the creature in the eye. 'And now that ring controls all the Ifrits. But through magic, I've found loopholes around his spell that can set you free. You can go back to your world, start a family and who knows, open a . . . bakery?'

The Ifrit blinked at Sinbad with peculiar interest. 'The guild sends me to places to extract information because, while they have rules and laws, I don't. You know that when I vanish, the body I inhabit goes away and so do the puny creatures that I kill? Poof! Everything disappears. You know that's not just why the guild likes me—because I leave no traces. The guild like me because I don't do the killing and torturing *for* them—I do it for *myself*. You see, little man, I *like* to kill and torture.'

Okay great, thought Sinbad. *I'm dealing with a psychopathic djinn. The worst kind.*

‘Now tell me quickly or I shall kill you very, very slowly.’ He squeezed Sinbad’s throat even tighter.

‘Okay, fine, fine. Her name is Idris.’

‘What?’

‘You told me to tell you.’

‘Tell me *what*?’ The creature looked at him incredulously. ‘That’s not the answer I’m looking for.’

‘I know, dummy. You should have asked who’s standing behind you.’

The Ifrit widened its eyes and turned to look back, only to see the purple-haired, overcoat-clad Seid had appeared with a spear of her own. She sliced through the Ifrit’s body, severing his head, before the creature could realize what was happening. It’s head fell with a thud on the floor, unceremoniously.

Sinbad had never been this happy to see his crewmate. Idris held out her hand to Sinbad and pulled him up.

‘And I thought I would never see you again,’ Sinbad smiled.

‘Ashrafiyah and Husayn told me you had been led somewhere here. They are searching for you on the other end of Baghdad, but hey, I happen to find before they could. It seems like I’m always saving your ass,’ Idris smirked.

‘I think it’s going to be a template for our future adventures,’ Sinbad smiled. ‘But before that, I have things to tell.’

‘Tell the entire team. They’re all around Baghdad in search of you.’

‘Entire team?’ His brows shot up.

‘Oh yeah, Safeena has woken up. And she’s had a bad dream.’ Idris shook her head in worry. ‘Something about a limping demon.’

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SEVEN

Safeena’s dreams were always a problem.

Sinbad had learnt this in the early months of having her on board his ship, when she would go into a deep slumber and speak to herself, get feverish chills and cry out loud, rocking with the waves of the sea. On waking, Safeena would hesitantly talk about what she had seen. It was usually her time in the past, how she had been created, what was happening in Qliphoth—the land of Iblis. She would converse with Iblis too in those dreams, but they seemed meaningless and pointless, full of words which no one could understand. She would shiver when she spoke about him—the devil. Shaitan. He embodied darkness, she would claim—unilluminated in person, wearing everything pitch black. Safeena could never put a finger on how he looked because he was, as she defined it, ‘featureless’.

In the corner of Safeena’s motel room, the crew had gathered. Sinbad recounted his adventure to them. In the end, they all looked at him with amusement, especially Safeena who blinked with her childlike cat-eyes.

‘It’s like trouble follows you all the time,’ Idris began.

‘More like bad luck,’ said Markus, the giant African warrior who led most of the crew as quartermaster on the ship.

‘Well, I don’t think it’s bad luck,’ Husayn started. ‘I think *he* is the bad luck, not the other way around.’

‘Yeah, now that I think about it’—Safeena raised her brows — ‘I was pretty content until he showed up on my island. Now look how life has changed.’

‘Okay, you know what—’ Sinbad tried to snap, but Pressa, the rude-mouthed young Chinese cook-turned-seer, spoke up.

‘*Wode maya!* This boy! He is bad for us. We should get rid of him.’

‘Hey! You know what, I didn’t start this for all of you to turn against me.’ Sinbad got up, exasperated. ‘I just wanted to talk about how great I am. And it’s not bad luck. We do dangerous things, so of course we’ll run into problems. Logic!’

They all looked at him in silence, arms folded across their chests.

Sinbad sighed. He was not getting much support from his team. ‘Okay, so tell me what you want to do.’

Markus began, ‘We shall save the world again, that’s what!’

‘Yeah, boy, the world is yet to see our magic.’

Ashrafiyah shrugged. ‘I’m not averse to it, sweetheart.’

Husayn just looked nervous.

‘I think you are underestimating the threat this time,’ Safeena finally said. ‘I don’t know why but I feel that we are dealing with someone who’s five steps ahead of us.’

‘You say this with certainty. Why?’ Ashrafiyah asked.

‘Because . . .’ Safeena paused. ‘Because my dreams have not been the ordinary kind. I even walked around.’

‘Walk around? Where?’

She blinked. ‘I don’t remember . . . and I’m a little scared to remember.’

‘Don’t worry, sweetheart. I have an idea. I recently learnt this spell,’ Ashrafiyah said cheekily. ‘I can recreate your dreams. You don’t even have to remember it, but we will *see* it. Care to indulge?’

Safeena turned to Sinbad, afraid.

‘You don’t have to do this if you are uncomfortable,’ he said softly.

Safeena nodded. ‘No, it’s fine. We might be able to connect the dots if we can all see the dream.’

Sinbad nodded. He was secretly hoping he would learn more about the Lame Devil, but he was also afraid that Safeena might be hurt in the process. But then he also trusted Ashrafiyah.

Safeena lay down on the bed, and they all huddled over her as she closed her eyes. Sinbad pursed his lips as Ashrafiyah, moved her fingers. Sparks began to shoot out of them and then in a moment, Safeena fell into a deep slumber.

‘Kind of an anesthetic,’ Ashrafiyah remarked. ‘Okay, sweethearts, now whatever you see may or may not be real. Remember, it’s a dream . . . or could be a nightmare actually.’

The group nodded in unison.

‘And all of us will face the dream—or nightmare—individually. So we will be alone when we enter her mind palace,’ the vampire explained. ‘Don’t be afraid. The goal is not to believe everything.’

‘Can we get trapped in the dream space?’ Husayn asked anxiously.

‘Oh, yes. Tell us, pale woman, can we pinch ourselves if it gets too scary?’ Pressa asked.

‘Nope. I’ll give it five minutes before I pull you all back. More than that would just create issues.’

‘Wait, wait! What kind of issues?’ Idris asked.

‘Umm, a coma for one.’

Sinbad narrowed his gaze. ‘*What?* We don’t want that.’

‘*No* one wants a coma, stupid. It’ll happen only if you’re clumsy. So don’t be clumsy. Simple.’ She shrugged and continued muttering her spells.

Purple sparks surrounded the group, shimmering and slithering through their bodies, weaving together in a circle. It now began to envelop them completely, before all of a sudden, the spark struck them right in the centre of their foreheads.

Sinbad blinked and found himself somewhere else. He didn’t know where, but it didn’t feel like Earth. There was also a weird energy to this place. Sinbad saw he was alone, standing before the back of a throne. Scattered skeletons and octopus tentacles lay strewn around him. The skies burnt crimson and blue, blurry and smokey. There seemed to be a kind of cataclysmic darkness surrounding everything. There was also the smell of death.

Sinbad couldn’t see the person on the throne, just the heavy flickering shadow.

Speaking to whoever sat on the throne were two similar-looking creatures—short horns, green skin, long jaws. It was some kind of an animal.

‘My lord,’ one of them said, ‘we have scrounged for lieutenants, but none are assisting . . . the whimpering fools. They either see our cause as a false one or think this is a fool’s errand.’

There was no response from the one on the throne, but the dark energy in the air became more concentrated.

The other demon spoke. ‘And the fact that your loyalists live here but can’t leave this place bothers us more. We are stuck. Otherwise we would have done the bidding.’

Silence.

‘What do you want us to do?’

Finally, a thick voice emerged from the throne. It had a lethal edge to it but also seemed to bubble with a deep sense of pain. ‘The defectors on Earth shall face my wrath. But desperate times call for desperate measures.’

‘What are you referring to, my lord?’ one of the demons asked.

The second widened its gaze. ‘Don’t tell me, my lord. No . . . not *him*.’

‘Him?’ The first one was still perplexed.

‘Sakhr is a powerful demon. An archdemon, to be exact,’ the second said.

‘But he’s mad! He’s crazy and unpredictable.’

‘Perhaps that’s what we need right now, correct?’ said the person on the throne. ‘We cannot rely on weak forces like Azrael any more.’

‘But . . . but . . . he’s a demon made *after* the veil was created,’ said the first demon, referring to the barrier between demons and humans. Created by Lord Ninurta and the other gods, it forced Iblis and his army to be stuck where they were. ‘He will be weak and impure. He’s lame and he’s broken. He’s not like . . . *us*!’

‘But he’s shrewder than any of us,’ came the voice from the throne. ‘You can never know what he’s thinking. Let him know I need his help.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Do you question?’

The demons instantly wavered, shivering. ‘No, my lord.’ They stormed away.

‘Daughter, do you not think I’m doing the right thing?’ Sinbad knew the question was for him. He was Safeena at this moment.

It was an old dream. Sinbad knew this since Sakhr was already doing the bidding.

Sinbad didn’t want to respond to him, but he spoke involuntarily. ‘Get out of my head.’

The one on the throne chuckled. ‘It isn’t possible. You are part of *me* now, and you will be able to see all that is going on. But do not worry. You and your friends won’t know my plan.’

And just before the dream collapsed, Sinbad heard a deathly whisper, ‘When you meet Sakhr, you’ll know why I got him on board for this. Azrael underestimated you all. His ego got the better of him, while Sakhr, he always respects and admires his enemies. He knows what they are capable of. He’s the only way to get me to the tomb, and *you* are the key to my salvation, Sinbad.’

Sinbad opened his eyes, his heart pounding and his breath ragged. All of them were back in the room, just staring at each other blankly. Ashrafiyah’s magic had stopped. A trickle of blood ran from her nose.

‘How was it? Did it help?’ she asked, wiping away the blood.

‘I believe we all saw an old dream,’ Sinbad said. ‘But it was worth it. The Lame Devil is called Sakhr, and he’s some kind of demon. A very smart one, as even Iblis says so.’

They all nodded weakly. Sinbad could see the fright in their eyes. His own fear was reflected in theirs.

He turned to look at Safeena, who was still in deep sleep. Ashrafiyah cupped her cheek. ‘She needs the rest, my love. The dream you saw is the dream her subconscious allowed me to access.’

‘But how was Iblis able to communicate through a dream?’ Husayn asked, his voice quivering.

It was Idris who answered. ‘I read about this. Dream sharing. Iblis and Safeena are part of each other, so they can communicate.’

Pressa asked, ‘So what do we do? We fight this émó or not?’

‘We should,’ Sinbad replied. ‘We should leave for the town of Nazir right away and find about this Umara Ibn Zayd.’

They all nodded, though they didn’t look too sure about it.

‘Are we going to earn some coin?’ Ashrafiyah asked sweetly.

Sinbad smiled back. ‘We will earn a reputation and freedom, and you can’t put a price on that.’

‘Oh, I can. Give me a hundred thousand dirhams and I’m good to go,’ Ashrafiyah retorted.

There was a knock on the door. Husayn opened it a crack.

‘Yes?’

‘Um.’ It was the voice of the innkeeper. ‘I believe there are some people here to see you lot. They look like they are from the guild and are searching for a cat-eyed woman, who was spotted in the area. I told them, “Hey, I have a cat-eyed woman right here,” so . . . erm . . . yeah.’

Sinbad stared at everyone and swallowed a lump. ‘Ah, great. Here we go again.’

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EIGHT

Husayn slammed the door shut.

‘Why did you just do that?’ Sinbad asked, confused.

‘Because the guild will suspect she’s here!’ He signalled frantically to Safeena.

‘But the innkeeper’s *already* told them! They *definitely* know.’ Sinbad cursed under his breath. ‘By the grace of storms and ravens, I don’t know what to do.’

‘I’ll bang their heads together, Captain.’ Markus raised his hammer.

‘No, no, we can solve this through words,’ Sinbad said. ‘Only words.’ He turned to Idris. ‘My dear sorceress, can you do something for me?’

‘Yes,’ Idris said, nodding. ‘Actually, no. I mean, I’m worried about what you’ll ask, so no.’

Sinbad shook his head. ‘No trust in me, I see!’ He turned to Ashrafiyah, ‘I’ve noticed over the last few months that you have been honing your teleportation spell. Can you open a portal to Nazir?’

‘Would be delighted to, sweetheart. It’s always great to do spells under pressure.’ She rolled her eyes.

‘Then I shall put more pressure.’ Markus came forward with the hammer.

‘Huh! It was a joke, big man!’ shouted Pressa in all of this. ‘This is getting too much. Just open the damn portal and be done with it, vampire girl.’

Ashrafiyah shrugged and closed her eyes, ready to work her spell.

‘Meanwhile,’ said Sinbad, ‘I’ll go downstairs to calm things down and buy us some time to escape.’

He opened the doors to the flight of stairs but didn’t spot the innkeeper. It was only when he descended to the floor below that he saw the innkeeper slumped against the wall.

‘You infidels have caused too much mayhem and insurgency, and now housing a terrorist? You bring a bad name to our land.’ It was a familiar voice.

Two men now walked up to Sinbad, swords dangling from their belts, looking at him with amusement. Sinbad recalled one Seid from the past.

‘Zahir, it’s good to see you.’

Four years hadn’t changed Zahir’s wild hair, storm-grey eyes, his perpetual frown or his forever flaring nostrils. But the one thing that always stood out was the large mole on his right cheek.

‘It’s gone hairy—the mole, I mean,’ Sinbad said mockingly, without feeling.

Zahir had been a menace and a bully when Sinbad used to be tutored by Master Reis. He was often shoved and pushed around and made to do menial tasks. It was because of this, Sinbad came to dislike the boy quite early on.

‘I’m not surprised to see you here, infidel. You are going against the very fabric of our guild. All this for her? You are hiding that cat-eyed woman here, correct? Like the last time. You even killed your master for her.’

‘Yeah, it’s been a while. But you’re wrong . . . We aren’t that close any longer.’

‘You’re not helping anyone here, Sinbad. She *deserves* to be with the guild.’

‘Right. So that your lot can use her as a weapon?’

‘Against a mutual enemy.’

‘I’m sorry, but she’s not an object. She’s a person.’

Zahir shook his head and stepped forward with his sword. But Sinbad anticipated it and kicked the Seid right in the stomach before pushing him aside. He clumsily ran up the stairs, back to Safeena’s room, banging the door shut and leaning against it. A cloud of bright blue and purple sparks swam about the room, crackling from time to time. He remembered Ashrafiyah telling him once that it was all made up of iron and sulphur, combined with elemental energy.

There was no one but Ashrafiyah left. She was holding on to what he now saw was a portal, waiting for Sinbad. It was a circular mist-filled hole from which deep purple, blue and green-coloured clouds crackled and sparkled.

‘Hurry! I can’t hold it any longer.’ Beads of sweat were forming on Ashrafiyah’s forehead, her fingers sparkling and crackling. ‘It’s reaching the point of portal displacement,’ she screamed.

‘What does that mean?’ Sinbad shouted, as he pressed his back against the door, which was being kicked and pushed by the seids.

‘You really want to know this now, you crazy fool?’ she looked at him, incredulously.

‘Could help distract me! I am out of ideas at the moment.’ Sinbad tried to smile, pointing to the door that he was pushing with all his body weight.

‘You’re insane. You know that right? But sure, if that pleases your highness. Every location in this world is connected to a portal. As a great sorceress, that I am, I can access the already existing portals that, by the way, can only be seen on summation. But sometimes, if the sorceress isn’t trained enough, unlike yours truly, the portals begin to clash with each other and that’s what leads to displacement. Which, to an idiot like you, means multiple portals being opened in multiple areas rapidly, and they are hard to control!’

Just then the tip of a sword burst through the wooden door, right between Sinbad’s legs.

The Seids were close to breaking down the door.

‘Make a run for it! Now!’

‘What about you?’ Sinbad asked Ashrafiyah.

‘I’ll go after you. Do you plan to ask me everything today, you idiot, or are you going to move?’

‘Oh, burst my pimples, yes!’ Sinbad roared, running towards the portal. But he was caught off guard as Zahir and his crony burst through the door.

‘Where is she?’ Zahir gaped at the portal. ‘Ah, no need to answer.’ He began to move towards it.

‘Argh!’ Ashrafiyah couldn’t hold it any longer. The portal burst, and instantly, multiple portals began to open around them, simultaneously. Sinbad and the two men reeled in shock.

‘While I shut these, distract them,’ shouted Ashrafiyah to Sinbad.

‘Can’t we just leave? Jump into one of them maybe?’

‘If we leave, you dolt, the entire fabric of time and space will destroy itself.’

‘And that will be worse that this?’ Sinbad laughed as he hurled himself at the other Seid, almost knocking him out,

when Zahir used his hefty shoulders to shove him.

Sinbad lunged at Zahir's collar and held on, pulling him into a portal that had just opened up next to him.

They found themselves in the middle of a stormy desert, the portal hanging in front of them.

'What the seven hells just happened?' Zahir screamed, spitting sand from his mouth. 'Let me at her, you petulant—'

Sinbad pulled out his sword. 'Why don't we fight?'

Zahir did the same. 'Gladly.'

They began to spar. Given their training history, their moves were predictable, with each one of them groaning in pain when hit.

Finally, Zahir angled his sword for the blazing desert sun to reflect off it. The light blast across Sinbad's face, who was blinded for a moment. Zahir lunged at Sinbad, who pushed back blindly. Both of them now passed through the portal, back to the motel, where Ashrafiyah was still busy closing the gateways.

Zahir instantly brought his sword to Sinbad's throat, but Sinbad turned and the sword went through the wooden wall.

'You can't keep running from me,' Zahir hissed. 'I was always a better Seid than you, you whiny brat.'

Sinbad pursed his lips, remembering how he was constantly berated by the guild. He always wanted to be more than that, to be great. *Probably abandonment issues after the parents left*, he reasoned. 'Maybe . . .' Sinbad saw that only one portal was left to be closed. 'But you're not smarter than me.'

He kicked Zahir in the guts and jumped towards the last portal, just as Ashrafiyah closed it.

They found themselves in the midst of sand dunes, similar to where he and Zahir had landed. But there were canyons and there was no raging desert storm.

Sinbad’s eyes first went to Pressa. Most of the group were looking at the canyon where Umara would have been.

‘What are they doing?’ he asked.

‘We have a problem.’

Sinbad and Ashrafiyah looked at each other.

‘We traced the coordinates on the caliph’s map. But it seems like Umara is missing, and his hiding spot has been ransacked.’

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NINE

Sinbad retched.

Sand slipped through his clenched fists, and his vision was blurry.

‘Why did he react to the teleportation so late?’ Husayn asked, amused. ‘I retched twice the moment I entered.’

‘Yeah, yeah, that’s what we live to hear, boy—how many times you have thrown up,’ said Pressa, rolling her eyes.

‘I would love to know,’ Markus chimed in. ‘Makes me feel less pukish.’

‘Isn’t that the opposite of what you should feel?’ Ashrafiyah asked innocently.

‘My friends!’ Sinbad exclaimed. ‘You talking about retching makes me want to retch even more, so kindly shut up.’

‘Always so rude.’ Pressa stomped off towards the cave where Safeena had woken up and was looking through the wreckage.

Idris knelt beside Sinbad and patted his back. ‘How you holding up?’

‘Let’s see . . . This time, a bigger threat looms over us. Worse than the world ending,’ Sinbad chuckled. ‘But on a

serious note, I just wanted to know if you are fine with the fact that we couldn’t help Emir.’

Idris arched her brows. ‘Uh, I’m not. From what you have said, Emir seems to be in great pain, and I just feel helpless, Sinbad. I don’t know what to do. But the walls of the prison are impenetrable, and we are fugitives for now. We can’t do anything as of now. You told the caliph you want Emir out in return for our help and for that I really am truly grateful.’

Sinbad sighed. ‘I thought after hearing about Emir, you would want to wait in the city.’

Idris shrugged, standing up and offering Sinbad her hand. ‘I’m not someone who waits but does. We are going to have him out by hook or crook.’

He grabbed her hand. ‘I also told the caliph that Emir should be put in solitary, if he cannot be taken out of jail, till we return. That way he’ll stay safe. But, given his catatonic state, I’m wondering how to get him out . . . if the caliph cannot do so. The guild is too powerful at the moment.’

Idris pursed her lips. ‘I believe we can’t use magic,’ said Idris, sadly. ‘We can’t use science. So the best we can do is call out to him with the help of love.’

‘Love?’ He chuckled without wanting to.

‘I know, I know. It’s corny.’

‘But sweet.’

‘How’s your lady love?’ Idris asked.

‘Doesn’t pay me attention.’

‘Maybe she wants someone to talk to.’

‘But then why wouldn’t she just say so? It’s simple,’ said Sinbad, irritated.

‘Women don’t say everything. They show you through actions. Even I know that and I’m not that ladylike,’ saying this, Idris walked away.

Sinbad re-strung his sword and wiped it with the end of his tunic. He was now in a dilemma—whether to walk up to Safeena and break the ice or let the cold war continue.

He walked to the cave in the front of him. He muttered a silent thanks to the caliph and his vampire friend. Due to the coordinates on the map, the portal had opened at the right place, otherwise correct teleportation to an unknown location was near impossible. ‘The one who opens the portal must have adequate knowledge of the place, like exact coordinates, or a clear picture of the place in their mind in order to transport,’ Ashrafiyah had explained once.

Sinbad now moved to the small, low-ceilinged cave. It was dimly lit by a half-broken lamp. But the rising sun was slowly filling the space with light.

Markus and Ashrafiyah stood outside, while Idris, Pressa, Husayn, Safeena and Sinbad were in. It was already getting congested.

Books, pictures, writings and reports lay scattered around them. Sinbad’s eyes went to an illustration of a muscular man. It was titled ‘Dhul-al-Qarnayn.’

‘Who could that be?’ Husayn asked.

‘The one who has two horns,’ Idris said. ‘We’ve read myths about a foreign warrior who built the Great Wall in Caucasia against the evil Ya’juj from the land of Ma’juj. He’s said to be none other than Alexander the Great.’

Safeena, who had been looking through some notes, said, ‘Umara had been searching for the lands in Scandinavia, and there are other lands that are mentioned but crossed out . . . This Sakhr got here before us. I have a bad feeling about him . . . We need to stop Iblis quickly.’

Sinbad could sense that this was less about saving Emir and more about Iblis now.

‘There’s information about the Rashidun caliphate, Alexandria and this . . . this . . . Philip the Third. Who is that?’ Safeena asked.

‘Well, I know about that,’ Husayn jumped in. ‘I had a friend in Basra way before I met Sinbad, a bookkeeper who would tell me about the successor to and half-brother of Alexander the Great. He was kind of a disturbed individual, a whack.’

Sinbad picked up an illustration of a broken star surrounded by what seemed to be engraved coordinates. ‘What is this? A wonderstone?’

‘In this illustration, the the stone looks divided . . . as if it was broken,’ said Husyan.

Idris nodded. ‘Whatever it is, we need to know where Umara is before he’s killed by the Lame Devil.’

‘Let’s not call him that,’ Husayn said, rolling his eyes. ‘I find that name horribly idiotic.’

Sinbad stifled a laugh and signalled to Pressa. ‘Are you up for a seer session?’

‘Ugh, okay. But I’ll need a personal item,’ she said before breaking into a long speech in Chinese. Sinbad waited for the seer to quiet down. He knew that Pressa could see the future but only in riddles. But lately, as her abilities had grown, she had gained more control over her powers and therefore, was able to see selective futures too.

‘There’s a locket that seems to belong to him,’ commented Safeena. She picked it up and opened it, revealing a photograph of a young woman. ‘Seems to be his daughter,’ she said, choking up.

‘Or his wife.’ Husayn had peeked over her shoulder to look at the picture. ‘We live in strange times, as you know.’

Safeena handed it over to Pressa, who closed her eyes and began to concentrate hard.

Sinbad interrupted. ‘Can we do it collectively?’

Pressa blurted out a few choice curse words at him but extended her palms, which everyone held, except for Markus and Ashrafiyah, who were guarding the cave.

Sinbad squeezed his eyes shut but saw his surroundings change. A scene from the future, probably, where the sun had already set over an oasis, surrounded by beautiful palm trees. Kneeling there was an old man with a grey beard and a bleeding scarred face, weeping. A dagger was poised close to his cheek.

'I don't know anything more. I have told you everything. I-I-I . . . please don't hurt me,' he cried.

Bald men in black cloaks, their faces pale and hairless, stared at him. In the middle was a cloaked figure, with fringes of what seemed to be its hair, popped out from the sides of the cape.

'You wanted to know where the wonderstones are and I-I . . . I told you.'

'But how sure are you?'

'I have not travelled there, but the emissaries I commissioned, they promised they saw the stones and I-I believe them.'

'Mmm, hearsay,' came the feminine voice. 'Tell me then, do I need to take you to the Admiral?'

'Yes. Yes. The Admiral can definitely use my help.'

'Are you just saying that to survive?'

'N-no. I truly believe it.'

'But, you see, I *don't*.' The cloaked figure sliced the man's throat, leaving him to bleed to death.

Sinbad snapped back to the present. The group took a deep breath and looked at each other. Pressa had begun to bleed from her nose, like she always did after a such an episode.

'I feel like fainting, boy,' she said softly.

‘He’s about to kill Umara,’ Safeena burst out. ‘I can’t have more deaths like this.’

‘It’s not a *he*.’ Sinbad shook his head. ‘It’s a *she*. It’s the red-haired woman.’

‘Who?’ Idris asked.

‘The one who killed Brother Cain.’

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TEN

‘I think we need to have the talk,’ Sinbad said to Safeena as they crouched behind the palm trees.

Sinbad and his team had managed to buy mules from a local farmstead, and had located the oasis. Luckily, the vision they saw through Pressa hadn’t taken place yet. Sinbad had planned an ambush for the red-haired woman, before she could kill Umara. Sinbad and Safeena would hide behind the trees while the rest would wait on their mules a few miles away, watching through their spyglasses.

Safeena focused her gaze on him. ‘What talk?’

‘You know, *the* talk.’

She sighed. ‘I really don’t know.’

‘Like what’s going on with you. You seem distant and we barely speak.’

‘There’s nothing to speak about. I just don’t want to remember the days I was under Iblis’s spell, okay?’

Sinbad was quiet. He could feel the restraint in her voice. ‘I thought asking you how you are was the right thing to do.’

‘Thank you for doing that, but I’m fine,’ came her matter-of-fact response. ‘I just need time to recuperate. After

serving Iblis for so many years, I can’t just switch off my feelings. You cannot expect this of me, Sinbad. I have done horrible things, nasty things, and I believe . . . I don’t know . . .’

‘You can speak freely. I mean, I know you don’t want us to be lovers again, but we can be friends.’

‘We were *never* lovers. Gods, Sinbad, we were children.’

‘Well, the feeling is not mutual. I think there was a fair amount of love.’

‘We respected and cared for each other, but that’s not love.’

‘And how do you know what love is?’ he said, angrily.

She sighed again. ‘Because I was in love . . . once.’

Sinbad’s heart dropped. ‘What do you mean you *were*? I thought I was the love of your life.’

‘That’s narcissistic.’

‘That’s a fact,’ he spat out. ‘Who was it? Weren’t you busy carrying out your evil deeds? When did you get time for romance?’

‘I met very good people while I was under Iblis’s spell. And I happened to meet a fisherman.’

‘A fisherman?’

‘He was a good man,’ she defended. ‘But we left each other.’

‘What happened to him?’

She shrugged. ‘I don’t want to talk about him with you.’

‘By the seven storms and seven hells,’ Sinbad cursed under his breath. ‘And here I was, keeping away from all the ladies.’

‘Oh, *really*?’

‘Oh, *yes*. I could have wooed all the ladies in Basra, but I chose to be loyal.’

‘I never asked you to.’

‘I can’t believe this.’ Sinbad rolled his eyes. ‘Fine. I shall trouble you no more.’

‘Don’t be a child.’

‘But I am one!’

While they bickered loudly, Sinbad failed to hear the hooves. They suddenly heard someone from beyond the water and the trees, a woman calling out, ‘Is someone there?’

Sinbad and Safeena stopped, confused.

‘What was the plan for if we got caught?’ Safeena whispered.

Sinbad peeked from behind the tree to see the scene in Pressa’s vision—a kneeling old man and a gang of black-cloaked warriors. They were the Nephilim, children of fallen angels.

‘How come we didn’t hear them?’

‘Because we were arguing!’ Sinbad cursed.

‘What’s the plan then? It isn’t much of an ambush if we get caught.’

‘I have a plan,’ Sinbad whispered. ‘Let them know that we are here.’

‘That’s not a plan. That’s suicide.’

‘Not really. Remember how I told you that you should not use your powers because you don’t know how many you might end up hurting?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well, forget that. Use them now.’

The red-haired woman’s voice rang out again, ‘Come out, come out, wherever you are!’

‘It’s me!’ Sinbad shouted, stepping out from behind the tree with his arms up. He was oblivious to the smile that the cloak hid.

‘Ah, it’s *you*. Welcome, welcome. I had a feeling you’re going to be a pain in the ass. And you too!’ said the woman when she spotted Safeena, who had also emerged from their hiding spot. ‘I was ordered to kill you on sight.’

Sinbad snorted. ‘Not so fast. We have backup.’

He waited for his crew to show up, but no one came. There was dead silence. A vulture flew over them. The red-haired woman looked at them quizzically. An awkward silence prevailed.

‘Um, is someone going to come?’ she asked.

‘Someone was supposed to come,’ he muttered, rolling his eyes.

‘No problem. While we wait, I’ll kill you two.’ The woman jumped forward into the water. ‘Get the old man out of here and into the ship,’ she yelled at the Nephilim.

Sinbad knew that waiting wouldn’t make sense, so he whispered to Safeena to catch hold of the Nephilim. She nodded and sprinted around the oasis towards the Nephilim. Then, using all her powers to manipulate elemental forces, she levitated the sands around her to form spikes, which flew towards the cloaked figures. They ran trying to deflect the spikes as new ones formed at every step.

‘I should have killed you when I killed that stupid vampire,’ said the red-haired woman as she dragged herself through the water, a sword in her hand. Sinbad too stepped in the water, his balloon pants getting wet. ‘But the Admiral doesn’t want you dead. What stupidity, I say.’

‘Sakhr? The Lame Devil? You call him the Admiral?’ He sniggered. ‘His names are turning out to be more and more ridiculous as the day goes by.’

The woman didn’t answer but swung her blade at Sinbad, who deflected it with a smile.

‘You know your enemy. Surprisingly, he knows you too.’

‘Tell me, my lady, why does he not want me dead?’

‘He says a mission without obstacles is pointless, and he considers you a worthy adversary.’

Sinbad laughed. ‘Oh, stop it, you.’

Their swords clashed.

‘You can’t win against me, boy. I am faster.’ She moved like a snake, turning around, behind him, and jabbing her sword forward. Sinbad felt his tunic rip. ‘I am stronger.’ A punch went by against the thick of wind and rippled against his chest. Sinbad fell in the water. ‘And I am better than you in every way.’

She now hovered over him, her sword against his chest.

‘True, except in one way.’ Sinbad smiled. ‘I am smarter.’

‘What?’ She looked confused.

A hammer came flying in the air, into her face, and blood spewed from her mouth as she fell deep into the water. Sinbad grinned; he had seen his friends charging towards him on their mules, but he had shown no indication of that to the enemy.

By the time he was out of the oasis with Markus’s hammer in his hand, Sinbad saw that most of the Nephilim were dead, killed by Safeena. The remaining were being chased by Idris and Ashrafiyah.

The sun bore down on them as they all looked at each other in relief, chuckling. Sinbad handed the hammer back to Markus. ‘Nice throw.’

‘Is she dead?’ Markus asked.

‘She better be, or she’s not human. The ambush didn’t work as I expected, but it turned out okay. As always.’ Sinbad turned to see Umara running from the group, stumbling across the sands.

‘You are going to die, old man, if you think you can survive the weather,’ Markus called out loudly. ‘We have food and

water and we have parked ourselves at a little fort to survive. So come back. Now.’

But Umara continued to run.

Ashrafiyah raised her brows. ‘Let me get him.’ She created a lasso of purple sparks out of thin air and threw it at the man.

‘Great. Let’s get to work, children, because we have questions. Lots of them.’

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ELEVEN

Sinbad had his crew stationed at the fort. After a tumultuous fight, they needed a break from all the stress.

While Husayn played the oud, his beloved musical instrument named Aphrodite, the rest fed their mules, after which they fed themselves some roast goat and chicken.

Sinbad, though, had to gain Umara’s trust, and bringing him back with a magical lasso had got them in his bad books. He gave the old man plenty of food and water and waited for him to speak.

The fort was a watchtower, and they had spotted many deserted forts in the area, abandoned since they belonged to the previous regime, the Umayyad caliphate. Ever since that caliphate was dissolved, these places turned into dead forts. Many had died here, and those who didn’t had panicked and escaped.

The sands were rough today, the winds were harsh and there was no sign of birds around. It was just them, the desert and the reptiles, ready to pounce.

Sinbad had put Umara inside one of the fort’s rooms. A fire burned as night was fast approaching.

‘This is the tenth time I’m telling you—we are the good guys,’ Sinbad said.

‘And this is the tenth time I’m telling you—I don’t care, mate.’

Umara wore optics and his hair, white as snow, in a bun. He had a thick, knotty beard.

‘We plan to do the right thing. Whatever these wonderstones are that they are looking for, this Admiral’s army, we plan to take them and give them back to the caliph so they’re safeguarded.’

‘They’re safe where they are. Taking them away would create worse issues,’ said the old scribe.

Sinbad rolled his eyes. In front of him were Ashrafiyah and Idris, who were ready to torture Umara to get the truth out.

Markus was ready with his hammer too.

But Sinbad wanted to use diplomacy. He had something that could gain the trust of the old man. He rummaged through his rucksack for the scroll, which he handed to Umara.

‘What is this?’

‘Just read it.’

‘I don’t want to, mate.’

‘This will clear your doubts about us.’

‘You have bound me. You used a magical lasso! My doubts about you are clear.’

Idris kneeled next to him and brought her knife next to his throat. ‘Read it, or these are the last words you’ll say.’

‘Um, uh . . .’

‘Yeah, be grateful we saved you, sweetheart,’ snapped Ashrafiyah. ‘We don’t usually give people time.’

Umara murmured under his breath as he looked at the scroll that was brought to him. ‘I see. The caliph. Fine, fine, just move that knife away.’

‘Thank you.’ Sinbad smiled as he nodded at Idris, who forfeited. ‘I know we don’t look like heroes, but we are the best shot you have.’

‘Heroes!’ the man grumbled. ‘I told the caliph what I’ve told you. Getting the wonderstones is a bad option. But the caliph wants them for his museum of ancient artefacts.’

Sinbad knelt next to the old man and said gently, ‘Do you want us to get them or the ravenous murderers you just met?’

Umara contemplated. ‘You’re right. You look like anything but heroes. You look like a bunch of bandits, scavengers, pieces of—’

‘We know, we know. We’re great losers.’ Husayn joined in. ‘But tell us, what are these wonderful stones? I’m super curious.’

‘Gods! Wonderstones, you baffoons,’ Umara sighed. ‘Fine. So, do you know what happened to Alexander of Macedon?’

Husayn intervened. ‘He was poisoned, wasn’t he?’

‘Kind of. The death of Alexander is of no consequence, but what’s interesting is what happened after that. Alexander died prematurely, at the age of thirty-two, as you all know. If he hadn’t died, he would have conquered the world. Some said he had the hand of god on him, some said he sold his soul to the devil. Either way, he was a horrible man. Someone who murdered thousands of people, Persians and others, to take over the world. He then set his satraps, his governors, across the globe to rule for him. But his death led to shock and surprise.’

Sinbad intently heard. Though he was horrified hearing all this, he couldn’t help but wonder what the greatest human would have to go through to fight so many people around him. *A leader’s curse.*

‘The Arabs called Alexander Dhul-al-Qarnayn, the man who built the iron wall against the evil Ya’juj and Ma’juj. This, of course, helped the Arabs. And Alexander fought for the Arabs too, leading him to be given the Water of Life.’

‘The Water of Life?’ Sinbad was shocked.

Umara paid no heed to him. ‘He had a brother. A kind of crazy individual, Philip the Third, who was at Alexander’s death bed. The story goes that Alexander had told Philip that he wanted to be buried in a particular spot, only days before he was poisoned. He had told Philip that his life was under threat.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. It had something to do with the Water of Life.’

‘Yes. That. I want to know about that,’ Sinbad desperately requested.

‘Um, yeah, what is that?’ Ashrafiyah asked.

‘Let me complete my story, you buffoons! ‘The Water of Life is this specific water that gives the user the ultimate power to do basically . . . anything. The power to be a god.’ Fear glinted in the old man’s eyes. ‘And Alexander had it. How he got it, no one knows. Some said it was from the devil himself or from the gods. Others say it was created by the mortal Arabs who gifted it to him because he had saved them. But, anyway, history says Alexander wanted the water so that he could conquer *himself* and become more powerful—a human god. He would have drunk it, too, but at the final moment, it seems, he feared the power that the water held. So he ultimately didn’t drink it. He died soon after. The Water of Life remained intact on his lifeless body when it was placed in his tomb, preserved in the same bottle he intended to drink from.’

‘Did the people know he had the Water of Life on him?’

Umara shook his head. ‘There’s no record of it, but Philip knew something was up—but having no concrete idea about the Water of Life, he even helped Alexander to be buried until he was attacked by Ptolemy, once a friend and now a rival who celebrated Alexander’s death. He grabbed hold of the remains but let Philip live. He believed that Alexander’s half-brother was an idiot and not a great man like himself, so he had no right over the body.’

‘So was he a friend or not?’ Husayn asked, engrossed in the story.

‘Kind of both. The history is confusing. Umara sighed. ‘Ptolemy had the tomb for the longest time in the capital, Alexandria, and it remained there until the Arab attack hundreds of years later. Then the Rashidun caliphate’s men had come, and there was a commander who learnt of this great tomb. Some sources say that the Rashidun had, in fact, sent the army in the first place to get the Water of Life. Anyway, so the commander brought it back to his hometown, though no one knows precisely where that place is. Legend has it that they tried to open the tomb but were hit with a curse as soon as they did. Many people died . . .everyone who was associated with it.’

‘So where do the wonderstones fit in?’ asked Sinbad.

‘Ah, yes. Back to Philip. People thought he was crazy because he was into black magic. But he truly loved his brother and realized that Ptolemy would never part with his brother’s remains. He knew the Water of Life would be dangerous if put in the wrong hands. So he consulted a witch and got her to put a curse on the tomb, somehow. Whoever opened it would perish. The catch was that only the noblest of the noble would be able to lift the curse and use the Water of Life for the sake of goodness. So one can guess that this curse led to the downfall of the

commander’s hometown. Anyways, the wonderstones were created to find the location of the tomb. The stones are magical; they are said to contain the tomb’s soul. It was one stone divided into three and spread across the world so that finding it would be difficult for the seeker.’

Sinbad asked, ‘So if you find the wonderstones, join all three, you’ll be able to find the the resting place of Alexander the Great and, in turn, the Water of Life?’

‘Yes, logically. But these stones are in the most precarious places, horrible ones.’ The old man shuddered.

‘There are a lot of loopholes in this tale,’ Idris remarked. ‘First of all, why did Philip let the Water of Life be buried in the first place? Why didn’t he just take it?’

‘I don’t know. His personal papers don’t say much. All we know is he really didn’t want his brother’s remains to be found. I personally believe it’s because he didn’t want the resting place of his great brother to be desecrated and thus concocted this entire sham. Or perhaps he really didn’t want Ptolemy to have the Water of Life to himself because he would have conquered Macedonia and maybe the rest of the world.’

‘Great. I believe this information is of great use. And now if you care to tell us the locations of the stones . . .’ started Sinbad.

The doors flapped open. Pressa barged in in a dire state, sweating, and declared, ‘Sandstorm! We have a sandstorm.’

Sinbad raised his brows and walked to the doors along with the others. Large waves of sand seemed to be attacking the fort.

But it wasn’t the sandstorm that bothered Sinbad. It was the one who had entered the fort. Even amidst the raging storm, he could see the cloaked figure with red strands of hair, flickering in the night light. And behind her . . .

creatures made of stone, basalt and cobalt, with red rivers of lava dripping from them, holding swords and other weapons.

‘She didn’t die,’ Husayn said, his voice quivering.

‘I shall hit her harder this time,’ Markus growled.

‘But now she’s not with the Nephilim,’ Sinbad said gravely. ‘She has Draugrs.’

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TWELVE

Draugrs were the living dead. Ghosts, spirits, revenants, cannibals . . . they were all of these. They were found in the most unusual places, places where people died, places where bodies lay decayed, forgotten with time.

That is—*this* place.

Plenty had died at the watchtower. Hundreds of Umayyad soldiers.

Now the Draugrs walked with the red-haired woman, risen from dead which was most probably her doing.

Sinbad still hadn't figured out what powers she possessed, but he knew she was deeply into dark magic. She had super speed and strength to kill a human in an instant. If it hadn't been for Sinbad's quick thinking at the oasis, he would have been dead by now.

And now she'd raised the Draugrs.

How do you kill the undead? They're already dead! Sinbad cursed under his breath.

The Draugrs walked through the sandstorm with pieced up flesh and bones, along with rocks and iron. They were like jigsaw pieces, glued together. Their outer bodies were an

amalgamation of the things around them that they happened to attract. But the most terrible thing was that it also latched to the souls of the dead.

‘How do you plan to do this?’ Idris asked Sinbad, who was speechless for a second.

‘Guard Umara since we can’t take him due to the sandstorm,’ Sinbad suggested. ‘Because then all of us would get killed.’

‘Or we can teleport?’ Idris asked, turning to Ashrafiyah, who shook her head.

‘The environment is too volatile right now. It is too dangerous. Let the sandstorm pass and I can open the portal to somewhere away from here.’

‘We need to buy time then.’ Sinbad gritted his teeth. ‘Pressa and Husayn, stay with Umara. And the rest of us—let’s face them.’

Sinbad ran out of the room, jumping from the ledge and somersaulting to the ground, his sword held high like a beacon. Ahead of him was the smiling red-haired woman, brandishing her shiny sword. She stood calmly against the backdrop of sand rapidly whizzing behind her.

Sinbad pulled up his tunic and wrapped it around his mouth, covering his face, to protect himself from the blowing sand. The symbol of the Ninurta guild shone on his bare chest.

Behind him stood Markus with his hammer, Idris with her spear, Ashrafiyah with purple sparks shooting from her hands, and Safeena with her twin swords, her cat-eyes glowing.

The red-haired woman pulled down the hood of her cloak. Her eyes were strikingly grey, somewhat like Sinbad’s. She was older than he thought she would be, streaks of grey running through the red. The Draugrs behind her had begun

to get frustrated, and they charged towards Sinbad and his crew.

‘Can you use the sandstorm to our advantage?’ Sinbad asked Safeena.

‘I’ll try.’ The sands around the Draugrs lifted and formed huge violent spheres that attacked the incoming creatures, who collided against them.

As the first lot fell, Ashrafiyah sprinted towards the other Draugrs, electric sparks flying around her fingertips as she shocked the creatures. She jumped onto them, her razor sharp fangs and nails, tearing into their bodies.

Like an acrobat, Idris gracefully swung her blade at the Draugrs, while Markus indiscriminately smashed his hammer against them. The Draugrs’ bodies were being torn apart, the remnants—stones and metals—scattering around them.

But Sinbad’s eye was on the red-haired woman. He began to race towards her, his muscular frame bracing against the storm. The woman had taken out her sword, and as their blades clashed, they both pulled back, looking into each other’s blazing eyes.

The sand whirred behind them. If it weren’t for the fort, they would all have been swallowed by the desert. The only entryway the storm had to the fort was through the gates the woman had opened.

Sinbad could see her face up-close now; she had a broken jaw and some of her teeth were missing, but she didn’t seem to care.

‘You’re quite annoying, you know,’ she said as she deflected a blow from his sword. Their feet seemed to move in tandem, their eyes locked.

Sinbad brandished his sword and almost slashed her stomach, but she pulled back like a dancer. He pushed

himself against the woman, pinning her down. ‘I’m proud to say I’ve been told that often,’ he panted before standing up, ready to spar. She sighed. ‘And I almost questioned the Admiral! He was right. You are quite an adversary . . .’ She disappeared into thin air before reappearing behind Sinbad and plunging her sword into his diaphragm. Sinbad fell to his knees as she ripped out the blade. He screamed in pain.

She held the blade against his chin. ‘. . . and that is why I will not kill you today, my dear boy. We shall meet soon.’

‘Tell that Admiral’—Sinbad clutched at his wound—‘I’ll be coming for him.’

‘Oh, he’ll wait. Till then, deal with that.’

That?

Sinbad turned to see what she was pointing at. The Draugrs, whom his team had managed to destroy, were beginning to move. The scattered parts of their bodies began to shake, flinging themselves at each other like magnets, creating one monstrous entity. The giant Draugr was almost ten feet tall. Every stomp of its foot made the earth tremble.

Sinbad swivelled to face the woman—she had disappeared.

He pulled himself up and wrapped the tunic around the wound, creating a tourniquet.

The Draugr growled.

Idris joined Sinbad. ‘You’re hurt.’ She looked worried.

‘Yeah, well, let’s just deal with the blo . . .’ Sinbad was swept by his feet by the monster and hung upside down.

‘Get away!’ screamed Markus, running to attack the monster’s gigantic legs, while Ashrafiyah tried her best to use her spells—but nothing was working.

Sinbad was held poised over the Draugr’s mouth. *I won’t die as someone’s dinner!* He swung his sword left and right,

writhing in pain, but the ten-foot monster remained unscathed. He pulled himself upright, the searing pain of his abdomen ringing through him, as his blade made contact with the Draugr's hand, cutting one finger.

The creature growled at that and jerked the hand holding Sinbad. He dropped his sword.

Sinbad felt himself inching towards the Draugr's mouth. He could see its decaying teeth and feel its hot breath . . . when he heard it, 'Close your eyes and push yourself away when I say so!'

He knew the voice—it was Safeena.

She had conjured the desert sands to form a terrifying tornado, that was ripping its way to the Draugr.

No sooner had Sinbad closed his eyes, horrified at the sight of the incoming rampage, that he heard, 'NOW!'

Sinbad kicked the hand with all his might and shoved himself away from the creature, dropping to the ground as a result, whilst the tornado grabbed hold of the Draugr and the souls it possessed. It enveloped the beast and its cries and wails, swirling and carrying it away from the fort.

The sandstorm suddenly abated and the howling of the Draugr, too, died down.

Sinbad stumbled to his feet, groaning. Safeena lay panting on the sand, tired with the amount of power that she had had to weild. Sinbad wanted to rush to her, take her in his arms, but he held back and gave her a nod instead, only to be ignored.

He didn't know when things had gotten worse between them.

'Let's not deal with that again,' Ashrafiyah said, appearing at his side.

They all ran to the upper floor of the fort. The doors lay wide open; Husayn and Pressa were slumped against the

walls on either side of the room, their faces and arms all bruised.

And Umara had disappeared.

‘We won’t have to deal with her again,’ Sinbad said, shaking his head in defeat. ‘The red-haired woman has gone, and now she knows where the wonderstones are.’

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THIRTEEN

‘By Fate and Fortune’ was a formidable ship.

Double masted, it had a spacious captain’s lodge, two levels of underground decks and a hull made of elfwood, with a figurehead of a mermaid. The ship could house around 200 people and the magical wood made the vessel ten times faster than any normal ship.

At night, the ship looked perfect at the docks of Basra.

Sinbad and his crew had teleported here, and while he had thought he would catch a glimpse of the red-haired woman’s ship, there wasn’t any sign of it. While his crew ate, toasted and drank their wine, it was Idris who sat in the quartermaster’s cabin and moped that they had lost.

Sinbad stood on the deck, leaning against the ledge and looking at the starry skies and the dark shimmering ocean ahead.

The twinkling stars made him think of his parents. He knew so little about them—who they were, whether they were alive or not. He wondered if they were up there, watching from above. He didn’t even know whether it made sense to even think about them—after all they were

probably dead or had had other children and just didn't want Sinbad in their lives since they never came looking for him.

Sinbad arched his brows when he heard a familiar voice:

'I hope you are not dramatically staring at the horizon.'

'That's exactly what I was doing . . . though it's a little hard given that it's nighttime,' Sinbad chuckled.

Husayn stood next to him. 'You know, I knew you when you were this mopey, serious, brooding boy. All of a sudden, you are this cheerful, snarky, sarcastic person. I wonder what happened.'

'Once you become the captain you realize that your temperament determines your team's temperament,' he sighed. 'I try to keep it lively, joking most of the times because we face grim challenges. If I grow stressed or scared, the crew, they'll feel it too and it will affect them.'

Husayn nodded. 'Must be tough to always put on a brave face.'

Sinbad flicked his hair out of his eyes. 'Saving the world once was not easy. Twice isn't going to be a piece of cake.'

Husayn smiled. 'I think I should stay here, in Basra, while you figure the rest out.'

'What?' Sinbad stared at his friend, stunned. 'Why?'

'Well, my friend, I don't have much to contribute, really. I have made my peace with it—before you counter it,' he held up his hand. 'Look, Sinbad, we both know I am not much of a help . . . I couldn't even protect that damn old scribe. His daughter-cum-wife or whatever must be worried . . . and that's on me.' Husayn sighed. 'I'm just a liability.'

'Husayn, please. You're anything but. You play the biggest role in all of this.'

Husayn laughed. 'And what role is that?'

'Being my friend. I have none but you,' Sinbad said sadly.

‘That’s not right. You have Safeena.’

‘I don’t know about that any more,’ Sinbad said, pausing. ‘This crew, they take care of us, but they are also people who want to look out for themselves.’

Husayn was about to say something, when the two spotted Markus.

‘Are you eavesdropping on us?’ Sinbad asked.

‘No. I’m just standing here,’ Markus said in a husky voice.

‘Is there something you want to talk about?’

‘Yes, a private word with you.’

Sinbad gently slapped Husayn’s back before moving to the captain’s lodge, where he seated himself. Nautical instruments, books, papers and diaries were strewn across the old wooden desk.

‘So, how can I help?’ he said to the bald warrior, who stood straight with his hands in the front. He was wearing a cut-sleeved flannel jacket with African designs on it.

‘Want a drink?’ Sinbad tried again.

‘I don’t drink,’ the man said in a gruff voice.

‘I see. So?’

‘I know we are in peril,’ began Markus. ‘The one man who can help us free Idris’s husband and save the world is kidnapped, and we don’t know where he is. I wouldn’t have said much if it weren’t for the caliph’s pardon. As you know, I am here as a conscripted slave. Of course, I have found my liberation with you and the crew, but I cannot escape this part of the country or enter my own land without the caliph’s permission. He bought me and only he can free me. So I need that pardon as much as anyone here.

Sinbad nodded.

‘I was separated from my wife and my daughter. And I would do anything to return to them.’

‘Markus, I’m sorry to hear what you are going through.’

Markus waved his hand. ‘Thus, I may propose a plan. It’s risky, but if we do it correctly, it will work.’

‘I’m all ears,’ said Sinbad.

‘Remember when I told you that back in Africa, I vanquished the son of Anansi with my bare hands?’

‘Yes, I remember,’ said Sinbad.

‘Well, I didn’t mention this but I fought the spider demon itself and trapped him in a jar that I have hidden with me for the longest time. That demon as we know is the trickster god Anansi.’

Sinbad nodded. He had heard about this god who would scam, con and deceive humans to meet his goals. His symbol was that of a spider, and it was said that his webs—cast by his progeny—were webbed across the world and the universe even, and that this was how he got his information about others.

‘He had troubled my daughter, so I fought him. For him to come to power, he has to make people go through tremendous pain. I trapped him.’ Markus said. ‘I trapped him, but I knew I couldn’t get rid of him. What if someone found the jar one day and let him out? I couldn’t let that happen.’

‘So how does Anansi play into this?’

‘He has information about *everything*, the past and the present. He has webs of spiders across the universe, and he can help us locate these wonderstones with ease. He was the last resort, but I believe now he’s the only choice we have.’

Sinbad thought for a moment. It didn’t sound like a good idea—to deal with a trickster but he didn’t see any other option.

Markus continued. ‘I can’t deal with him. You have to trick the trickster because he will try anything to get out. So

please, I beg of you, don’t let anything bad happen. Don’t let him fool you.’

‘Don’t worry about that.’ Sinbad grinned. ‘I’ll sort him out.’

Markus looked unconvinced.

‘What? You don’t trust me?’

‘I’ll ask Idris to go with you.’

Sinbad flared his nostrils. ‘I am the captain, Markus. Like it or not.’

‘Of course, you are, and I have high respect for you . . . But you can be quite brash sometimes.’ And then he left the room, saying the final words, ‘Let me know when you want to talk to Anansi.’

Sinbad stayed in the lodge for some time after Markus left. He walked over to the window, his eyes fixed on the undulating, endless ocean.

When he saw . . .

It almost looked like an apparition from miles away, and it stood there, gently swaying in the dark waters. The ship had come out of nowhere, as if by magic. Even in the night, one could spot it clearly for it was made of thousands of skulls and bones. It looked ancient, and was dark in colour and looked intimidating—aimed to put fear in the heart of men.

Sinbad ran to get himself a spyglass for a closer look.

The deck was empty barring two figures—one a cloaked, red-haired figure and the other wearing a long coat, a loose white shirt, trousers and boots. His greasy hair was pulled back and his alabaster skin was as smooth as marble. He held a cane in one hand, leaning on it. He grinned, looking straight at Sinbad.

It was as if he had come all the way just to show Sinbad that he was not a myth, that he was *here*.

Unafraid.

Mocking him.

‘The Admiral,’ Sinbad whispered.

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FOURTEEN

‘This is a bad plan.’

. . . was what everyone said, except for the quiet, brooding Markus.

Sinbad had tried to forget the ship and the man with the cane. It couldn’t be real, he thought. His eyes were deceiving him, but then—it *felt* real.

Ashrafiyah was in the corner, arms folded, leaning against the wall with a frown, while Idris and Husayn repeated what a terrible idea it was. Safeena just listened. Sinbad had barely spoken to her, and he didn’t know when they would—or if ever they would talk properly again.

‘So no votes for this new plan?’ Sinbad quizzed naively.

‘No!’ Pressa shouted at the top of her lungs. ‘Idiot boy, we don’t want you to release a scary trickster god.’

‘I’m captain, not an idiot! And why would I ever do that?’

‘He could trick you and you wouldn’t even know it,’ Idris sneered.

‘What do you think of me? I’m smart, you know.’

Ashrafiyah mumbled under breath, ‘No, you’re stupid but extremely lucky.’

‘Well, when things happen once in my favour, that’s luck. When it happens multiple times, it’s not luck, it’s just smart work.’

Husayn shook his head. ‘Nope. Still dumb luck.’

Sinbad slammed his hands down on the table. ‘In case you all haven’t noticed, we don’t really have much of a choice. Anansi is our best option. We don’t have much time. Sakhr is already ahead of us.’

Idris turned to Markus. Eyeing him.

Markus shrugged. ‘Don’t look at me. I just suggested.’

‘Will Anansi even know where the wonderstones are?’ Idris mused.

Markus nodded. ‘He has spiders everywhere, so that’s not a worry. He is fed information about everything from all the spiders in the world.’

‘Then couldn’t we just directly ask him where the tomb of Alexander lies? Why worry about the stones even?’ Ashrafiyah asked.

Markus shook his head. ‘The spiders can only fetch him information about places that are not cursed. The tomb is cursed, so the spiders stay away from it and anywhere that possesses dark magic.’

‘Right. And you have him in *this* jar?’ Pressa asked, pointing to the dark, ornate container made of iron glass on the table. ‘Now, big boy, shouldn’t you do it instead of Sinbad?’

‘He will kill me on the spot,’ Markus chuckled. ‘But he wouldn’t with you, Sinbad. He will at least listen.’

Sinbad rolled his eyes.

‘And how do we plan to do this?’ asked Idris.

‘Put my consciousness into this.’ Sinbad looked at Ashrafiyah.

‘Oh, you’ve gotta be kidding me.’ Ashrafiyah was astonished. ‘You do realize if I do that, you might fall into a coma and die. But then for a fool like you, at least it’ll be the joy of a painless death.’

‘What does he even mean?’ Husayn asked her, perplexed.

‘As I told you, every inanimate object has a soul. They are a world in itself, and one that is joined with the soul of a god. So if I tie Sinbad’s soul to the trickster’s soul, he’ll be in his world. He can only get out if he somehow defeats the god or the god lets him out himself.’

‘Great, so you can die now, captain boy,’ Pressa blurted out.

‘Well, at least it’ll be painless.’ Sinbad grinned but no one smiled back. ‘Come on, everyone, I know this is not the most orthodox idea, but let’s do it. We don’t have time and I’ll handle things. I always do, so trust me. Trust. In. Me.’

‘Fine,’ came Idris’s response.

Husayn and the rest didn’t say anything. Ashrafiyah stepped forward and whispered to Sinbad, ‘Be careful, love.’ She pulled back and said casually, ‘Let’s put you on this table, shall we?’

Sinbad nodded, clearing everything off the table and lying down.

‘All of you, step back. This is going to get a little crazy,’ said Ashrafiyah. Purple and blue sparks crackled from her fingers, as Sinbad closed his eyes. A cloud of energy burst above them as she began to pull out thin blue ribbons of energy from the jar, connecting them to Sinbad’s head. Just as it happened, all the papers, scrolls, maps and curtains began to flutter around them angrily.

Sinbad didn’t feel anything for some time, but then his body jerked and what felt like electric currents began to zap through him.

He was standing now.

Not on the ship, but somewhere dark.

The clouds hung low in the sky, the trees were dead, the ponds dried up, and the roads were made of mud. Spiderwebs dotted the trees and skeletons littered the roads. There were hills in the background, but they seemed to have no life. He had never seen such a dead place in this life, devoid of all life.

Quite comfortable, the inside of the jar, thought Sinbad as he walked through the dead landscape, navigating his way through it.

Sinbad walked for some time when he heard something crawling on the web-covered tree trunks, though he couldn't see anything. Sinbad had a bad feeling about this.

He unsheathed his sword.

There was other sounds now—a strange purring and tap of crawling—but whenever he turned his body, he couldn't spot anything or anyone.

'Is that you, Anansi?' he asked. 'I'm here to talk to you. I'm not a threat.' He looked at his sharp blade. 'I mean, as long as you are not a threat to me.'

From out of nowhere, a web shot towards him. Instinctively, he ripped through it with his sword.

'No need to get hostile now, Anansi.'

He dodged another web that came his way before the culprits began to show themselves—spiders, huge ones. Not the kind you would see on a house wall or in a jungle. These were strange beasts. They had eight legs like a normal spider, but each ended in a talon. Their large teeth and large, bulbous eyes gave off an eerie air.

More webs came Sinbad's way, now from the rear, which he dodged, but some of them caught hold of his feet and he crashed to the ground.

A spider now landed on top of him, and Sinbad swung his sword across its hind legs. Green blood poured out of the gaping wounds. While he tried to pull himself up by ripping apart the webs covering his feet, another spider approached from behind and pulled away his sword, harshly.

Another spider dangled from above, spinning a web to cover Sinbad. Before he could even think of escaping, he was wrapped up like a mummified body, with only his face left uncovered, and hung upside down. Sinbad tried to move but the web wrap was too tight; he felt helplessly constrained.

‘Poor mortal, you have killed one of my children. Sssad.’

It was a sharp, low voice.

Sinbad tried to straighten himself and see where the voice came from. A figure moved into the clearing before Sinbad. The bottom half was a dark spider, with eight spindly legs scuttling forward, but top was that of a dark-skinned, bald-headed human with smoky, dark-set eyes and long ears. A feather crown sat atop his head.

‘Welcome to my prissson, mortal,’ hissed the half-spider-half-man. ‘I am Lord Anansi. You wished to sssee me? Now hurry, hurry and tell me what you want . . . Or maybe I can just poison you for fun.’

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FIFTEEN

The blood was rushing to Sinbad's head as he hung upside down. He felt like he would pass out, but he knew everything rested on him. So he willed himself to be awake.He strained to look at the figure below him. Something about Anansi was off. Sinbad felt a strange sense of dread and despair.

'You know, you're really not helping anyone by hanging me here like this,' Sinbad said. 'I'm not here to fight, just saying.'

The god scuttled forward, his spider friends all hissing and croaking.

'You' are the bad bald man's friend, aren't you?'

'You mean Markus?'

'Yes. Markusss.' Anansi came closer to Sinbad. 'I don't like your face.'

'You're not the first person to say that.'

'And you ssspeak a lot.'

'Should I respond to—' Anansi growled, shutting him up quickly.

‘I want to be out of this prissson. I hate this place.’ The creature moved away in anger and frustration. ‘I want to live my life outside this cage. I was happy once. But here . . . I’m sssurrounded by my thoughts and trapped in my own subconscious mind that creates this setting.’

‘Okay, I’ll speak to Markus about it.’

‘Oh, please. He wouldn’t let me out. I troubled his daughter far too much.’ The spider smiled.

Sinbad felt uneasy. ‘I wonder how.’

Anansi fixed his icy glaze on Sinbad. ‘He didn’t tell you?’ He sneered. ‘His daughter wanted the ssstories of the world to be told to her because her parents were, tch tch, illiterate. “O Lord Anansi, bestow me with stories! Please tell me the stories! I want to know!” she wailed and I, a god, blessed her, the poor kid. I had a box of the ssstories I stole from the sky god Nyame and gave it to her. But it didn’t go so well.’

‘What happened?’

‘Some ears are not ready to hear all the ssstories of the world. She couldn’t stop listening and her ears bled. She cried and wailed, “Ssstop it, ssstop it!”’ Anansi chuckled. ‘Oh, how it made me laugh so much.’

Sinbad’s blood boiled. He wasn’t close to Markus, but he liked his commander. But more than that, Anansi seemed capable of terrible cruelty.

‘You’re one sick divine being, I’ve gotta tell you,’ Sinbad snapped. ‘How come you’re called a trickster? A trickster is someone who hides in plain sight and makes a fool out of you. Harmless, sometimes even nice. You, on the other hand, are reprehensible.’

The demon laughed again. ‘You ssspeak a lot, but not much of it is beneficial to me. Now tell me, what’s that one

good reason for me to let you live?' He brought one of his eight legs up to Sinbad's chest, ready to strike.

'Because I can . . . let you live,' Sinbad blurted out.

'Let me out, you mean?'

'Y-yes.'

'How?'

'Break the jar from outside. That is, if you help me.'

For a moment, Anansi almost seemed convinced, before he chuckled. 'You consssider me an idiot, don't you? The moment I help you, you will leave here and laugh at me with that bad bald man.'

'You have my word.'

'Word? I don't even know *you*. Your word means nothing to me, mortal!' he exclaimed, baring his teeth.

'So how else can I convince you?'

Anansi narrowed his gaze. 'First tell me, what help do you require? Give me the story,' he purred.

Sinbad sighed. He knew lying to the trickster wouldn't do any good and so he recounted the tale of the missing wonderstones.

'Interesting,' mused the god. 'I know where these wonderstonesss are. My children tell me they emit a certain energy. Yesss, they have spoken to me about it. Information comes to me easily, you sssee.'

'Care to tell me?' Sinbad ventured.

'Not really, no.' Anansi laughed. 'But let's have fun, shall we? I will tell you where the first two fragments of the wonderstones are. The third part I'll tell about once you agree to do my bidding.' Anansi seemed to be enjoying this.

Sinbad clenched his jaw. 'Fine. Go on.'

'Lovely.' Anansi smiled demurely. 'The first part of the ssstone is on Buyan Island. Few possess the energy to find it, and when they do, they only see mist and fog. There are

ssstrange monsters who protect the ssstone, and stranger ssstories that surround it. The wonderstone was kept there because it somehow found its way into the hands of the island lordsss, who thought of it as a magical way sof helping them. Instead it cursed them. The foolsss.' Anansi sniggered.

Sinbad said nothing though he was itching to know more.

'The sssecond fragment of the wonderstone now belongs to an ancient cult in the Arctic, which also happens to protect an even more ancient entity. An entity ssso primitive and primordial that if one even happens to look at its true state, one can go blind. The cult considersss the wonderstone a tablet that they think is connected to this ancient entity.

'And the third . . .' Anansi paused. 'Are you ready to make the bargain, mortal?'

'If you want me to help you escape—I'll do it.'

'No, no. I need collateral.'

'What?' Sinbad felt uneasy.

Anansi smirked. 'I hear you are in love with a woman. Sssafeena, your crew member, isn't it?' He came close and Sinbad could smell dead rodents. Suddenly, the stench seemed to have heightened. 'If you allow me to place a ssspell on you, then you shall have my help.'

'Spell? Wh-what kind of spell?' Sinbad was a little taken aback.

'Once your mission is complete, Sssafeena will forget about you. She won't have any memory of you. Not a speck.'

Sinbad rolled his eyes and tried to play his words off, his heart thudding. 'Well, she already doesn't care, so it's not like I'm losing anything.' He tried to show that it didn't bother him, but the thought of it actually terrified him. He

didn’t want to be obliterated from her memory, where she didn’t even know that he existed.

‘But you *do* care. And that is what that mattersss to me. The only way to get her memory back will be to releassse me.’

Sinbad contemplated this. He knew that he would figure out a way to get her memories of him back after the mission. He had to take that risk to stop Sakhr for good.

‘Fine. I allow it.’

‘Good job, my friend.’

Had Sinbad been tricked? He didn’t know for sure, but what he did know was that things could go grossly wrong. Alarmingly, the moment Sinbad agreed to Anansi’s spell, a strange, burnt symbol appeared at the end of one of the god’s legs, which he then used to brand Sinbad’s arm with, forming a tattoo of intertwined spiderwebs that formed into a shape of spider legs. Sinbad winced in pain. But more painful, he thought, would be to hide it from the crew, Markus especially. Trading with a trickster wasn’t going to reassure any of them.

As Sinbad thought more about it, he didn’t seem to find any loopholes in this barter. *Safeena wouldn’t care anyway if she forgot about me. So, it wouldn’t matter.*

‘So tell me now,’ Sinbad urged. ‘The third part of the wonderstone.’

‘Constantinople, the heart of the Byzantine Empire. A young boy rulesss under the shadow of his mother, and in one of his templesss is the stone. They consider it sssacred but they, of course, don’t know the true power of the stone.’

The three places revealed. Sinbad had to get there before Sakhr did.

‘Thank you. Can you untie me now? I would like to go back.’

‘I’ll do you one better,’ Anansi said with a smile. ‘I’ll wake you up. I hope I sssee you again, dear friend. Goodbye.’

One of the spider legs smacked Sinbad in the stomach. He blinked and found himself under the dim light of his lodge, sweating and panting. Many sets of eyes were looking at him.

Ashrafiyah grinned. ‘You came out alive and well, sweetheart! That is one good news.’

‘What did Anansi say?’ asked Markus, elbowing his way to the front of the group. ‘Did he try to trick you?’

‘No, no, he told me some stuff, and in return I had to tell him some stuff. He was pretty kind about the entire affair,’ Sinbad lied.

‘Well, that’s good news, little man.’ Markus chuckled and punched him in the stomach.

They all rejoiced and decided to celebrate on the deck, giving Sinbad some time to recover. Only Husayn was left in the room, just about to walk out, when he asked, ‘Sinbad, are you fine? For sure?’

‘Yeah,’ he said, still profusely sweating, ‘I’m as grand as ever.’

Husayn smiled. ‘Okay . . . good job.’ He left, gently shutting the door behind him.

Sinbad turned his back to the door and his eyes fell on his arm, covered by the sleeve of his tunic. He pulled it up and there it was . . . his mistake or his salvation, he did not know. It was a strange, spidery flower, with criss-crosses running through it, like a web.

I hope I don’t regret this.

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SIXTEEN

The ship was rocking and moving forward.

When Sinbad had woken from his delirious state, the ship was told to sail as they figured out how to reach Buyan Island. They were on their way to Scandinavia—at least, according to the maps—but those seas were inhabited by new-age pirates called Vikings. They were known to kill innocent people and pillage towns and villages.

Reaching Scandinavia would take a tremendous amount of time, and it would lead them to the very heart of danger. Though the Vikings had a good relationship with the caliph, they did not want rogue ships in their area.

Ashrafiyah, who was something of a geography geek, was holed up in her room, figuring out how to reach the island. Till then, they fluttered and flowed in the Persian Gulf.

Sinbad was eating in the mess, which was located on the second floor. They had a roast and vegetables tonight. Sinbad chewed his hunk of bread quietly, thinking. He had kept Anansi’s oath mark hidden, but he was also beginning to recognize that something had gone wrong. Had he done

the right thing? He wasn’t sure. Anansi had made it sound simple. Too simple.

Two benches away, Safeena sat, eating her meal in similar silence.

‘Are you okay?’ Husayn appeared out of nowhere and sat next to him. ‘Did you and Safeena solve things?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t think we will.’

‘I find it childish. So what, she had another lover. It doesn’t matter.’

‘I *am* a child, first of all,’ Sinbad said defensively. ‘And second of all, I’m not angry about that. I’m angry that she chose to forget what we had.’

‘We all do.’ Husayn patted his friend’s back. ‘What we do as kids, we often forget.’

‘Well, I don’t think we should. I mean, who are we if not what we used to be.’

‘We are grown-ups. And that’s what life is about—growing up. She grew up but you are choosing not to.’

‘As my friend, you’re supposed to support me, Husayn,’ Sinbad said, stung a little.

‘And I am. So go on and apologize to her.’

Sinbad shook his head. ‘I have never apologized for anything.’

Before Husayn could retort, Safeena walked up to them. She held the back of a chair and looked tentatively at Sinbad.

‘Captain, can I have a word with you?’

‘You can have it right here, miss.’ Sinbad gleefully grinned with a mouthful of bread.

Safeena glanced at Husayn, who awkwardly turned to face the other way but continued to feast.

‘I just want to apologize. I was rude to you.’

‘Oh? Rude when?’ Sinbad asked.

Safeena scoffed. ‘You’re going to play it like that, then?’

‘I don’t know what you’re saying, nor is it of any significance.’

Safeena rolled her eyes. ‘Why are you like this?’

Sinbad wanted to say plenty, but he chose his words carefully. ‘Because you were my Calypso’—he paused—‘and now you are just Safeena.’

Her brows arched and her mouth parted. Sinbad could see the memories behind her eyes. ‘I’ll take my leave,’ she finally said, walking off.

‘What is a Calypso?’ Husayn asked, interrupting Sinbad’s reeling thoughts.

‘That’s between us.’

‘You know, you two are sick, with your random secrets.’ Husayn shook his head. ‘I miss Basra. Maybe I should have just stayed there. Hunting monsters and earning money. And now, we have graduated to demons and what not! What if it was a mistake to come out here?’

Sinbad nodded. ‘I miss it too. The old life.’

‘Then why did you become the captain? You don’t need the ship. You’re fine without it. Idris was doing fine too. We could have stayed back.’

‘When you learn there’s a greater evil, plotting the downfall of humanity, you feel responsible to do something about it, no?’

Husayn chuckled. ‘Now that’s something to think about. Saving our friends . . . but risking our lives again and again. I’m not sure we’re cut out for this.’

‘I always craved belongingness, Husayn,’ Sinbad lamented. ‘A place where I can say—this is my area. This is my home. My parents abandoned me, my master was a fanatic and I was all alone. At least I have a purpose here. I belong here.’

‘Truth be told, I’m here because of that too,’ Husayn mumbled. ‘Prove to my late father that I can be a warrior too, like him—be great like him. But I often second-guess myself.’

‘There are enough people out there who will second-guess you, so why waste your own energy on it? Let them do it.’ The two began to laugh when Sinbad saw Markus at the door, indicating for him to come outside. When they stepped out, Markus directed the two to Ashrafiyah’s lodge.

‘She has found a way, our vampire friend. And she can do it quickly. But there’s a problem.’

Sinbad sighed. ‘Of course there is.’

They knocked on Ashrafiyah’s door, which had so many warnings scribbled on it, it looked more like a teenager’s than a vampire’s. ‘Knock before entering or you’ll get a head-popping spell put on you!’ Sinbad laughed.

They entered to see Ashrafiyah suspended in mid-air, books, quills and inkpots levitating around her.

‘So what’s the grand plan? To teleport us again?’ Sinbad asked.

‘I researched a lot and discovered that while I don’t have Buyan’s exact coordinates, I can’t just whip you all there. But there’s a loophole.’ She smiled. ‘Something that will get our entire ship over there.’

‘My kind of loophole. I’m all ears. What sort of teleportation spell are you thinking?’

‘We don’t teleport.’ She grinned. ‘We fly.’

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SEVENTEEN

‘Fly?’

‘Yes, fly,’ Ashrafiyah said, leaning against the wall, mid-air.

The two had taken their conversation to the deck. The rest of the crew had joined them.

‘I don’t think that’s a wise decision,’ Sinbad responded. ‘I think we need to stay on the ocean.’

‘There’s no fun on the ocean, my love.’

‘It’s not about fun! It’s about safety. We haven’t done this before. What if . . . what if someone *falls*?’

Ashrafiyah shrugged. ‘That’s their fault.’

‘That’s not an answer.’ Sinbad looked at Idris; she was the more responsible one, while Sinbad usually wasn’t.

Ashrafiyah put her hands on his shoulders. ‘Okay, listen carefully, sweetheart. Even though we have elfwood, we won’t be able to move any faster than this.’

‘What about opening the portal?’ Idris asked.

‘The portal, my dear lady, is not something I can just whip out of my perfect backside. It takes time, and while we could have done it for shorter distances, we’re talking about Scandinavia. The land is way too far! That too without

perfect coordinates. What if another portal opens and we are back on the desert? By my calculations, it'll take almost twenty-five days to reach by ocean waters, while by air we can reach in—she clapped—"five."

They all fell silent.

'I know, this sounds absurd, and you *are* the captain, sweetie, but believe me—I have tried to figure out every other possibility, and only this one makes sense.'

'I don't like this,' said Sinbad, shaking his head.

'I know. But this is our only chance. Being captain means making tough decisions, the ones that are right for *now*.'

Sinbad had never thought his childhood pen-pal would be giving him such sage advice. She seemed to have rapidly matured over the last few months. Earlier she would have done anything for money, like a true mercenary for hire. But now, though she didn't want to show it overtly, she had begun to care more and more about her teammates. Things had truly changed when Sinbad and Idris saved her from being murdered by Brother Cain after his great betrayal.

'I want to get the caliph's pardon as much as anyone on the ship,' she said softly so only Sinbad could hear. 'I want to live a free woman. I am done being a slave or a wife or an agent or a spy. As a vampire, I'm already condemned but this pardon could give me the opportunity to have an ordinary life—well, as ordinary as a vampire can manage. Maybe get married and have a child.'

Sinbad arched his brows. All of them seemed to have dreams of moving on, while he sought to revel in only the present. He looked at Idris. 'This is the only way to save your husband.'

Idris clenched her fist. 'All right, but if anyone dies, the vampire has to revert the spell.'

Ashrafiyah rolled her eyes but nodded.

‘Go ahead, start it,’ directed Sinbad.

The vampire stepped back and began to chant.

Purple orbs began to form above her palms. ‘Come on, come on . . .’ she muttered.

The orbs flew around the group and bounced around the deck of the ship. It passed right through the wood of the ship, breezed through the mast and then finally, went through the bodies of the crew.

The ship began to rock violently, and Sinbad had to hold on to the mast, squeezing his eyes shut. He could hear the crashing of the waves, but when Sinbad looked over the ledge, he saw that they were levitating, the water far below them.

He looked at Ashrafiyah, who was now levitating herself. Her face was contorted, and her eyes closed. The purple orbs flying in and out of her, furiously.

The ship lifted farther and farther above, high in the skies. Soon, they were enveloped by clouds. Everyone began to cheer, clapping each other’s backs and laughing.

Sinbad grinned, realizing what Ashrafiyah had just accomplished. ‘Never thought I’d see this day.’

Ashrafiyah snapped back to the moment, slowly flying back down. ‘Thank you for trusting me.’

‘Being captain means trusting your crew. Even when they cannot trust themselves or have shortcomings,’ he said softly. ‘Open the sails, and follow the wind. We are leaving for the north,’ he ordered his men.

‘Where to, aye?’ one of the sailors asked.

‘To Buyan Island, close to the Nordic Islands.’ He smiled. ‘And let’s hope we don’t find ourselves battling Vikings.’

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EIGHTEEN

It took them four days instead of five to reach what they believed was the island.

From up above, the mist-covered island had looked smaller than they had imagined. Sinbad had studied the maps over the course of the last few days and everywhere the islands were shown to be covered in heavy mists. Even the recounts of the Arab travellers and chroniclers noted that the island was always shrouded in a thick, supernatural fog.

Now, Sinbad had stationed the ship back on the ocean, and thankfully, they had come down with ease. Ashrafiyah's spell had worked like a charm.

He was in his lodge, looking at his papers and talking to Pressa and Husayn.

'I can't believe this,' Husayn said, turning the page of the book he had been reading. 'Buyan Island has apparently catered to a lot of deaths and disappearances. People from neighbouring islands have heard eerie cries that sound like strange animals. There have been sightings of a dragon too.

At one point it was where merchants would escape to and build their fortunes, for it had great iron ore reserves.'

Sinbad chuckled. 'There are no dragons.'

'That's what *you* think.'

'I mean, there used to be, a long time ago. They don't exist now. They became extinct after Lord Ninurta killed most of them. They were a menace back in the day. Laying eggs and all.'

Husayn shivered at the very thought.

'Captain boy, you be careful. I have a bad feeling about this.'

Sinbad sheathed his sword, as well as a few pocketknives. He put on his tunic, which had Celtic runes on it, acting as a shield from magical attacks, and slung his satchel across his shoulder.

'You sure you don't want us to come with you?'

'No. Sakhr will probably come here, and I want you to stall him. Or the Vikings.'

'I wanna see the Vikings.' Pressa sounded excited. 'I've heard some strange things about them. They kill people and speak like monsters.'

Sinbad chuckled. 'I don't think that's true. They are humans. Just good at fighting.'

'Eh, you always have to spoil things.' Pressa crossed her arms around her chest.

'Care to tell me a little about what's going to happen?' Sinbad asked the young seer.

'It ain't coming to me. I'm trying but I just feel so dead inside. Give me some time. I shall meditate and recharge and get myself back in action.'

'I hope you do. You are our only hope. Without you, we'll have no idea what's going to happen to us.'

There was a knock on the door and Safeena peeped in.

‘I hope I didn’t disturb you.’

‘We’re definitely not talking about how you two are ignoring each other,’ Pressa announced with a grin.

Safeena blushed. Sinbad did too, shooting daggers at Pressa.

‘I don’t want to interrupt,’ Safeena said hurriedly, ‘but, Sinbad, you need to see this.’

Sinbad walked to the deck, Husayn and Pressa following closely behind, to find the crew there, mouths agape with horror.

In front lay the island, that was for sure. It was, however, surrounded not only by dense fog but also the wreckage of a dozen or more ships. The water was littered with debris. Only a boat could take them to the shore safely.

‘What happened here?’ Sinbad muttered.

A chilly breeze whipped around them, and along with it came a sense of loneliness and despair. Sinbad felt strangely empty inside.

‘Are you absolutely sure you don’t want me to go with you?’ Idris asked, looking worried.

‘I want you here. Sakhr has not reached yet, which is good.’

‘Or he could be getting the other wonderstones,’ Idris put forward.

‘Yes. That. But if we get even two wonderstones, that’ll be a win for us.’

‘Don’t worry about that.’ Ashrafiyah was at his side now. ‘Sakhr hasn’t touched any of the stones.’

‘And how might you know?’

‘When you told me about the locations of the stones, I contacted the imps I know in those regions. They told me there has been no sighting of them. So we’re one step ahead.’

Sinbad grinned. ‘Good job. Shall we leave then, my lady?’

Sinbad and Ashrifyah sat in the boat with two of Markus’s men while it was lowered into the muddy ocean waters. They began to row carefully towards the island, past the shattered ships. They spotted skeletal remains and rubble in the wreckage—the water was plagued with bloated, decaying corpses that were stuck to broken masts and hulls.

‘I didn’t want to come,’ Ashrafiyah said anxiously. ‘I don’t know why you are taking me.’

‘Come on, it’ll be fine.’

Ashrafiyah blinked, unconvinced.

‘I wanted to ask you something,’ Sinbad said. ‘A few days ago, you said you wanted the pardon. The Ashrafiyah I know doesn’t care about love and marriage—all of this sappy stuff. She likes to live on her own terms, always independent and unattached from people. So what is the pardon for?’

Ashrafiyah licked her lips. ‘Can’t a woman have secrets?’

‘Hey, just asking. I thought we’re friends.’

‘And we are. But I have my personal life.’

‘What life? You have been with us for months now.’

‘And I grudge it every day, my love. Sometimes, I miss working for money and not emotion,’ she grunted.

‘Aw, you like us,’ Sinbad said with a grin. ‘But I believe you also like the cook’s daughter.’

She raised her brows, flushing. ‘What?’

‘I’m the captain of the ship, my dear. I have a habit of knowing everything.’

Ashrafiyah didn’t respond. They moved in silence to the shore. The men remained in the boat, waiting for them to return, while the pair spotted a bridge. They crossed it only to find a decaying ship, beyond the groves, crashed across the shores on the opposite end.

‘Gods, what happened here?’ Ashrafiyah remarked. ‘Look, there’s a flag.’

‘I thought you were a vampire and you can’t swear.’

‘I am a religious vampire.’ She rolled her eyes.

‘Is that even a thing?’

Ashrafiyah shrugged.

Sinbad looked at the flag. It had the symbol of a raven on it. And its pole was made of reed. *Not much of an advanced naval system since it belonged to—*

‘Vikings.’ Ashrafiyah completed Sinbad’s thought. ‘Their leader has this flag. But what were they doing here?’

‘Searching for the stone, I think,’ Sinbad said. ‘I hope the stones have not changed in appearance with time, you know. It will be mighty difficult to spot them then.’

‘Sinbad,’ Ashrafiyah said in a low voice. ‘I’m as dumb as you when it comes to this, and I don’t like that. But . . . but I sense a tremendous amount of tragedy here. Something happened, and I don’t know what—’

A piercing wail interrupted her.

Sinbad and Ashrafiyah shared a glance before rushing towards the noise, their swords out, the vampire’s fingers crackling with energy. They ran through the thicket before their eyes landed on a three goblin-like creatures attacking what looked like a sailor. Sinbad saw that the goblins had bald heads and bulging stomachs. Their feet pointed backwards and that wasn’t even the most horrific part. It was the abnormally large jaws and huge fangs.

The sailor was fending the creatures off as best he could, but fear glinted in his eyes. He wailed and begged them for mercy, but the creatures just laughed. They seemed to be having fun with their prey. Finally, a jab to the stomach killed him on the spot.

‘What are goblins doing here? They are usually used as slaves for menial labour,’ Ashrafiyah whispered.

Sinbad didn’t listen further, as he rushed towards them and used his sword to sever one goblin’s feet, while another came at him, talons bared. Sinbad lunged and slashed its abdomen, blood and guts pouring to the earth. It lay dead.

The third goblin stopped all of a sudden and knelt before Sinbad in defeat, shivering and crying.

‘I demand to know why you are here,’ Sinbad shouted.

‘They . . . they Vikings . . . they use us to take the stone. They treat us slaves. We no threat. We take revenge,’ the goblin cried.

‘The stone? What stone?’

‘Healing. Bad king of theirs. He wants stone. He still here. To rule over everything.’

‘King?’

Shivers ran down Sinbad’s spine when the goblin told him who it was—a name synonymous with carnage, bloodshed and violence of all kinds.

‘I’m sorry, I killed your friends. I thought you were . . . I was wrong. I have a boat here. My men will drop you to the nearest isle. Leave, while you can.’

The goblin nodded. He started picking up the remnants of his friends in his bag. As he did so, the severed head peeped out and smiled at him. Sinbad almost retched. Goblins were hard to defeat but one could conquer them by decapitating their limbs, though it was a horrible sight later on.

‘What happened?’ Ashrafiyah asked Sinbad when he walked back to her. ‘You’re ashen-faced.’

‘Well, the Vikings did get here before us.’

‘Yes, I know. We saw the shipwreck and the flag. And that’s a problem?’

‘No. That’s not just *a* problem. We have a big, huge calamity because their leader is here. I’m sure you’ve heard of him,’ said Sinbad. ‘Ragnar Lothbrok.’

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NINETEEN

The island was turning out to be more isolated than Sinbad had expected.

The farther they traversed, the more distant they found themselves from the existence of human life. It was like walking into another dimension and Sinbad was unable to shake off a strange feeling that seemed to be engulfing him. And they had no idea where they were going, only knowing they had to find the stone.

They reached the centre of the island, where broken towers stood amidst detritus.

Sinbad stood beneath the intertwining trees with branches that zigzagged. The fog was getting denser, the night, colder. ‘We need to take some time off. This is getting worse,’ said Sinbad.

Just then, the howls of a strange beast rang out from afar.

Ashrafiyah swallowed and nodded.

‘We should have gotten more people to help us.’ Sinbad regretted.

‘No, Sinbad. That would have attracted more attention from whatever it is on this damned island.’

They were about to take shelter in one of the towers, when a loud rustling came from the grove ahead of them and something hurtled towards the pair. Sinbad pushed Ashrafiyah out of harm's way.

Sinbad got to his feet shakily to see what had just attacked them. He was dazed and his eyes watered.

A dragon!

Not as large as the ones legend described, but a dragon nonetheless. It had hardened scales on its body and long whiskers near its mouth. It had a relatively long jaw, serrated ears and large talons. But unlike large, fully developed dragons, this one's wings weren't large enough for flight.

And even though the creature seemed to be a small baby version, it was big enough for Sinbad to realize that they need to run for their lives.

'What the hell is that?' Ashrafiyah cried.

'Whatever it is, it's charging at us. And it doesn't like visitors. So can we go to the tower now?'

But as they tried to make a run for it, the dragon galloped towards them and, with a sharp twist of its tail, swung against Sinbad's chest. He was thrown off his feet into the distance, almost getting knocked out by a tree trunk.

As Sinbad gathered his wits and saw that Ashrafiyah had begun to conjure up a spell. Her fingertips sparked purple energy. The creature deflected them with its long tail, but the spells were raining down heavily on it. The dragon screeched and howled. And all of a sudden, flames burst from its mouth.

Ashrafiyah dodged, but her hair and robes were singed. Sinbad moved silently behind the dragon now, slowly sliding underneath the dragon's feet, hidden from its sight. As he neared Ashrafiyah, he quickly grabbed her hand.

‘We can’t win this one. Go inside!’

They stormed into the tower and shutting themselves in from the dragon.

‘He burnt my beautiful hair! I’m going to torture him to death,’ she screamed.

‘Yeah, well, it broke my spine. So I guess we got evenly damaged,’ he rolled his eyes.

They heard the wails and roars of the creature before it finally quieted down. The dragon seemed to have left.

‘Why didn’t the dragon attack the tower?’ Sinbad thought aloud.

‘Good luck for us.’

‘Nope. One thing I know, we aren’t *that* lucky.’

Ashrafiyah didn’t stay to hear and began to climb the stairs. Sinbad followed her to the top floor of the tower, where a pristine library greeted them. A portrait hung above the fireplace.

‘Garafena,’ Ashrafiyah said reading the calligraphy underneath the portrait of the man with curly hair and a red beard. ‘Quite a charmer . . . You know, Sinbad. This place holds a lot of tragedy. There is too much history here in the walls and the land. I can feel it in my bones.’ She moved to the desk and looked through the letters in the drawers. ‘He was a vassal from Novogorad. ‘He travelled from his fiefdom to supervise the iron ore supply on this island, and he was not alone. He came with a friend, another vassal—Gagana.’

‘Interesting, Ashrafiyah,’ Sinbad said, humoring her. He found a nook to lean against. ‘Tell me more about it.’ He closed his eyes, ready to sleep.

‘You’re not taking me seriously, are you? There’s a lot of sadness here. I’m telling you.’

‘There’ll be a whole lot more sadness for you if you don’t let me rest.’

‘Ever the charmer. And you were right about the cook’s daughter.’

Sinbad’s eyes snapped opened. ‘Tell me more.’

‘Look at you. Hungry for information now.’

‘Ah, well, it’s a topic that interests me.’

‘Right now, the cook doesn’t like me because, well, I am a woman and so is his daughter. He doesn’t approve of what we feel for each other. He thinks it’s unnatural.’ She shrugged. ‘I don’t care. I want to run away with her. That’s why I want that pardon. It’ll help me go to places without any questions asked, thanks to the caliph. Live a comfortable and happy life with her.’

Sinbad smiled. ‘I’m happy for you . . . but that means you’ll leave.’

‘Of course, my love. What did you think? That we’d stay together forever? In the end, it’ll be just you and the ship.’

Sinbad knew she was joking, but it had begun to dawn on him that this family he held on to wouldn’t always be with him. Everyone needed an anchor at the end of the day. Everyone wanted a companion who they could talk to, laugh with, share secrets. Unfortunately for him, that someone didn’t like him anymore.

Ashrafiyah turned to the shelves that lined the walls, pulling books from them.

‘There’s something here,’ she suddenly said. ‘A doorway behind the shelves. Care to see?’

Sinbad knew she wouldn’t let him sulk or sleep, so he helped her clear more books of the shelves, to fully reveal the hidden room. They stepped through the doorway. It had an inviting bed and cool marble flooring.

‘This room reeks of love. It stands out in this deary environment. Don’t you think so, Sinbad? Everything in the room seems simple and yet not . . . somehow.’

Ashrafiyah carried some of the journals and documents to the secret room to study, while Sinbad flopped down on the perfect bed.

‘Choosing to stay with her, does it scare you?’

Ashrafiyah didn’t look up from the notes. ‘Very much so. I don’t even know whether I’ll be able to love her forever . . . She’s also mortal, so she will die one day. So yes, it does scare me. I feel clueless at times.’ She shrugged. ‘Maybe monogamy is not made for me.’

‘You have commitment issues?’

‘Seems like it, doesn’t it? Sinbad, I have been abandoned and unloved since I was born. My stepfather was cruel, my birth father disowned me . . . I have never had any love or friendship worth keeping in this long life. It’s all issues here.’

‘Wow! Thank you for that!’ He rolled his eyes. ‘Oh! Come on, don’t be a child. People come together for a reason,’ she said gently. ‘We all need each other right now in this time of life and thus we are here together. Everyone eventually goes away.’ Ashrafiyah gave a sad smile. ‘At times, I feel, there is nothing in this world called love. It doesn’t exist. So maybe that’s why monogamy is the way to go—not out of fun, but out of fear.’

There was silence in the room for a long time.

‘That’s interesting,’ Ashrafiyah noted while reading. ‘Apparently, when they came here, they found a stone that they called the Alaytr stone, named after Gagana’s late daughter, who died of a genetic disorder.’

‘Alaytr?’ Sinbad said, sitting up.

‘Yes. There’s even a map of where they found it. Probably the wonderstone?’

‘Yes, could be.’

‘And they thought it was a healing stone because it looked ancient and seemed to have a certain magical essence

around it. They don’t describe much though. Anyway, says that they desperately needed that, and their beliefs were not based on fact but desperation. Gagana suffered from the same thing his daughter did.’ Ashrafiyah arched her brows. ‘And he would have died if not for that. Says here they somehow had begun to use it for their own benefit . . . began to harness magic out of it until they were caught by their commander.’

‘What happened then?’

‘No idea. The journal ends here. But there’s something written about the commander. He was into the dark arts and had witches accompanied him. Not someone to trifle with.’

‘What happened to the two vassals? I guess we’ll never know.’

‘We can if I can raise the—’

‘No, Ash.’ Sinbad stood up. ‘We have a mission. We need to get the stone and out of here. No complications.’

‘But if I can give them peace, wouldn’t that be nice? This fog, this mist . . . they happen when sadness externalizes itself. This island can be restored to what it once was. It just needs to be cured.’

‘But that’s not our job. Why are you so interested in this?’

‘I don’t know. Vampire witches can be very empathetic at times, I guess. I still think about that flying carpet. I hate you for letting it get away. I will never know how it is doing now . . .’

Sinbad was studying the map. ‘It’s close by. I believe we can reach it quickly so . . . let’s go?’

His partner reluctantly nodded.

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TWENTY

They didn’t reach quickly.

After a long trek, they discovered that the stone wasn’t where it should have been. Now they stood in a dark place, shrouded by tall grove, and surrounded by waterfalls. There seemed to be a number of dingy caves on top of the falls.

Sinbad hadn’t encountered any creatures yet, but he noticed that the mist grew denser whenever they inched closer to their objective. Even the waterfalls, which looked harmless from afar, were black and thundered down in a violent manner. They even gave off a gloomy vibe.

‘It’s supposed to be here,’ he said, looking at the dug-up ground. ‘But it must have been taken out a while ago . . . but not too long either . . .’

Ashrafiyah cut his thought mid-way. ‘We should go back to the tower and be done with it. Make up lost ground in the morning. I’m sure the mist will clear.’

Sinbad shook his head. ‘I want to keep searching. The stone must be close.’

‘Fine, be my guest. I’ll sit here while you do the heavy lifting.’ She settled down on a big rock. ‘I’ll give you moral

support,’ she smiled.

Right when Sinbad was going to point out that she was meant to help him, they heard it.

A loud cry.

A human cry.

‘There’s someone else here.’ Sinbad pulled out his sword, and Ashrafiyah sprang up.

They went off in search of the voice. The wails and cries grew louder when they reached another waterfall. The land was murkier here and the terrain rough. And then they saw it:

> A large serpent, with fangs as big as its tail, almost twenty feet long, fighting with a man and his sword. The man had a shiny white beard and striking ocean-blue eyes. His hair, cut really short on the sides of his head, was gathered in a thick bun. Tattoos covered his arms and legs. He was hurt and struggling, but clearly ready to fight the snake till his last breath.

‘Should we wait till he dies painfully?’ she asked looking at the large serpent.

‘Have some humanity,’ Sinbad snapped. ‘Plus, he might know where the stone is.’

‘How caring of you.’ She rolled her eyes.

There was another loud cry.

‘Okay, time to help,’ Sinbad said to Ashrafiyah. ‘You go behind while I distract.’

He charged forward, holding his sword aloft, and said, ‘Hey, you lazy-looking monstrosity!’

The snake turned and bared its fangs, its bulbuous green eyes focusing on Sinbad. Even the man turned to look. Clearly, they both thought Sinbad was calling to them.

‘I am talking to you, just to clarify,’ Sinbad said to the snake.

It slithered towards Sinbad and lunged at him, ignoring the man, who toppled to the ground. The snake attacked mercilessly now, its fangs out, but Sinbad dove through the air, slashing his sword through the surrounding thick mist and making contact with the snake's skin—the blade sliced through, singing the snake's scales. The serpent let out a long and loud hiss.

'Ashrafiyah,' he screamed, 'it's time to get out.'

But there was no response. The snake spun around, striking Sinbad's face with its tail. He landed on the ground with a thud.

He stumbled to his feet, wiping away the blood from his mouth before slicing the serpent's skin again. This time, it tried to attack with its fangs, which he deflected with his sword. He plunged it deep into the snake, making it hiss and jerk violently. Sinbad was sure he was going to beat the creature, but then . . .

The snake began to coil itself around Sinbad's body. He felt his bones being squeezed and his ribs about to be crushed when a beam of light shot through the serpent.

The snake hissed and loosened its grip on Sinbad, who crashed down. Panting for air, he scrambled for his sword.

Ashrafiyah had appeared, casting one spell after the other and blinding the snake, who began slither backwards in confusion, hissing angrily. Finally, it disappeared into the jungle.

'This blasted island.' Sinbad wiping the sweat from his brow. 'You were quite early. I was just about ready to die.'

'Sorry! I was trying to recall the right spell. Cons of being a vampire, you have a terrible memory."

'Huh? Never thought vampires had any memory problems.'

'You have no idea.'

While talking it suddenly struck him—the two monsters were strangely similar in nature. Not just that they were big in size but there was something peculiar about their eyes.

His reverie was interrupted by the noise.

The bearded man on the ground softly moaned.

‘I think we should take him somewhere,’ Sinbad said.

‘Back to the tower?’

‘It’s late. The mist is getting too thick. And anyone can attack. How come all these bloody creatures exist on one tiny island?’

‘Well, that’s why—back to the tower.’

‘We aren’t going anywhere. I think I saw a cave behind the waterfall. We’ll be camouflaged there.’

Ashrafiyah grimaced but guided the way through the water, while Sinbad carried the man on his back. He noticed that though the man was old, he was still quite large and rugged.

‘You know, you’re a vampire. You have more strength than I do.’

‘But you are more noble in helping the needy. That’s a trait we vampires forget to have,’ she laughed. ‘Before you ask. Yes, we feel more for inanimate things, like my flying carpet.’

They entered the cave and Sinbad lay the man down. He cupped some water from the floor in his palms and splashed the man’s face before looking around.

Bones and skeletal remains littered the ground. It looked like the hideout of a bandit.

He turned to face the man. ‘Hello, are you all right?’ Sinbad noticed puncture wounds on the man’s arms and legs. ‘Did the snake bite you?’

The man was shaking and muttering to himself. He seemed delirious.

‘Two of them. Th-th-there are two of them . . .’ the man whispered. His forehead was burning and he had broken out into a sweat.

‘There seem to be venom is in his bloodstream,’ Sinbad said as he pulled out a few ointments from his bag. ‘Dwarf’s blood.’ Sinbad rubbed it into the man’s wounds. ‘This will get you back on your feet in no time.’

The man continued to talk nonsense and look around blankly for a long while.

‘We need to stay here till he gets better,’ he said to Ashrafiyah.

‘Look at him. He’s a Viking. Why bother? They’re criminals. Pirates. The worst kind,’ she said.

‘And what are we? We were pirates too, right? We should help our brethren . . .’

Ashrafiyah didn’t bother responding, studying the painted walls of the cave instead. ‘Look at all this writing. People stayed here a long time ago,’ she finally said.

‘More like they hid.’

‘Yes. There’s a story here. This man’—she pointed to one section—‘is saying that he stayed here for days. He was saving himself from the creatures, from a curse. There were others too . . . farmers, it seems. They all hid here. It’s not clear though . . . They were part of something that they later regretted taking part in . . . Looks like they acted as a mob . . . It seems the farmers wanted to hurt someone but it backfired . . .’

‘You’re creepily interested in this island, aren’t you? I’ve never seen you like this.’

‘When I took witchcraft classes, in secret that too, I learnt that where there’s mist, there’s tragedy. And there’s this sense of loss I’ve been feeling ever since I got here. Now,

we’re going to do something, and I don’t want you to say no.’

‘What? Classes in secret?’ Sinbad looked amused.

‘Yeah,’ Ashrafiyah replied. ‘There was a time when the Guild decided that it wanted to train witches—talented young women who could manipulate time, matter and energy. But it was kept under wraps. I had gotten myself enlisted as a sweeper so that I eavesdrop.’

‘Why didn’t you just enroll?’

‘Because I am a vampire,’ sighed Ashrafiyah. ‘We are not easily let into normal societies. But to think of it, who wants to be in the guild anyways? Not too long ago they suppressed, tortured and even murdered witches. The men thought them as a threat since they were highly intelligent and much more talented. Over time they have just become an oppressive entity, really. It seems like everyone starts off fine, only to end up all corrupted. And now, I am going to do something. Don’t mind.’

‘And what would that be?’ Sinbad asked, curious.

She picked up a skull and flashed her winning smile at him. It was a smile that could kill thousands, like a flash of shooting arrows. It was a smile that had mischievousness combined with a tinge of malice in it.

‘We are going to talk to the dead.’ She turned to the skull. ‘Let’s see what you have to say.’

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TWENTY-ONE

Sinbad knew this could go horribly wrong when his friend began to chant in some otherworldly language, her eyes closed.

‘Okay, what the hell are you doing?’

‘Shush!’ she snapped.

Sinbad flared his nostrils as the man beside him groaned in pain.

‘You’re waking the dead! We need to be focused. This is not the time,’ he hissed.

‘Don’t disturb me or I’ll sew your mouth shut.’

‘Well, that’s impossible,’ he retorted.

She said nothing.

‘. . . isn’t it?’ He looked at her, confused.

She continued to chant, and the skull, which had been placed back on the ground, began to tremble. A thin line of green smoke began to emerge from it. A line that soon took the shape of a person.

A person with no features.

It was an apparition of some kind, a ghost, but one that appeared like a genie out of a lamp. It was something out of

a children’s story.

‘Identify yourself,’ Ashrafiyah said, opening her eyes now.

‘I am the peasant Skaa,’ came a spirit’s deep voice.

‘Why are you here, Skaa?’

‘Why? I was—’

‘Yeah, yeah. I brought you from the netherworld.’ Ashrafiyah just shrugged.

‘Did you just break a law that the guild has established? No contacting the dead!’ Sinbad snapped.

‘So what? The guild won’t find out unless *you* tell them!’ Ashrafiyah hissed back at him.

‘But the fabric of time and space could be ripped apart if the netherworld and our world collapse because of your stupid story session!’ Sinbad cried.

‘Oh, and opening portals for your convenience won’t do that!’ She rolled her eyes.

While they bickered, the green spirit stared at them, tapping his foot.

‘That was a life-and-death situation. This is a you-getting-curious situation,’ Sinbad said.

‘This place feels tragic to me, and I want to know why,” she snapped.

Skaa decided to interject. ‘Are you two married?’

‘He should be so lucky,’ Ashrafiyah said in a flash.

‘Have I been summoned from the dead to listen to you two argue like children? I’m getting exhausted. So, if you can, please tell me why you’ve called me here and I shall be on my way.’

Ashrafiyah grew serious. ‘Tell me what happened here. With the stone. With Garafena and Gagana.’

The spirit shuddered. ‘Do not utter those names. Vile. Lecherous. Dirty.’

‘And why is that? What did they do?’

‘They used some strange magic.’

‘What?’ Sinbad squeaked in confusion. ‘Strange how?’

‘Testing their occult abilities on people. Experiments to save Gagana. They were sadistic murderers, those two. Looted and tortured a lot of farmers in their lifetime. Pathetic. Evil-hearted,’ the spirit spat. ‘When we discovered what they were up to, we all banded together and brought a witch to the island to destroy them and the stone. They were rich landlords, you see. They had a big army and as farmers we couldn’t physically fight.’

Sinbad rolled his eyes. Witches were rarely a good idea. ‘The curse she put on them went wrong, correct?’

Skaa nodded. ‘It turned them into these two bloody monsters . . . the creatures that stalk this island. The stone is now the only thing that can kill them. All Gagana wanted was to live more since he was dying, and now he does—but in this beastly form. The very thing that they thought were their salvation, turned into damnation . . .’

‘So this is why they protect the stone. They fear someone will use it to kill them,’ said Ashrafiyah.

‘Yes,’ said Skaa. ‘We hid in fear. Many of us died at their hands, eaten alive. They relished us, it seemed. Many of us hid here. We wondered why they didn’t change back to their human form when they could have.’

‘Why didn’t they?’ asked Sinbad, intrigued.

‘The curse would have broken if one of them died—the other would become human once again. They could have easily killed each other. But they didn’t. Willfully. Despite having killed hundreds of others. The monsters continued to spread terror in Novograd together.’

Sinbad and Ashrafiyah weren’t convinced. Something just wasn’t adding up.

‘Was it really because of the experiments that you brought the witch here? Or was it something else? Don’t lie to me,’ spoke Ashrafiyah sternly.

‘I mean . . . um . . .’ The spirit looked as if he had been put on the spot. ‘We thought that was the reason. Our village headman was the one who convinced us all to do so. And we listened. We just did as we were told.’

The village headman is the missing piece, thought Sinbad just when he heard a mumble.

‘Where the Odin’s eye am I?’ It was the bearded man in a thick Danish accent.

The apparition disappeared as Ashrafiyah waved him off, and she and Sinbad turned to the man, who had stumbled to his feet. He still looked confused, his eyes dazed.

‘We saved you.’ Sinbad cross his arms around his chest. ‘I believe some acknowledgment is in order.’

‘You are Arabs. You dark-skinned mules!’ the man sneered.

Sinbad let out a low whistle. ‘Okay then, that was unexpected.’

‘Should I just kill him now?’ Ashrafiyah asked simply.

‘You can’t kill me!’ spat out the man. ‘For I am Ragnar Lothbrok.’

‘What?’ Sinbad ogled at the man. ‘*You* are Ragnar? I thought you’d be bigger.’

‘And broader,’ Ashrafiyah added.

‘And perhaps have more hair.’

‘And bulkier arms. I mean we heard rumours that you had three eyes and muscles like Thor’s Mjolnir,’ Ashrafiyah mocked. ‘Looks like Thor’s toenail to me.’

Ragnar narrowed his gaze, astonished. ‘What in Fenrir’s fur are you talking about, you imbeciles?’

‘What we are saying is we saved you, so please be grateful and avoid the racism that runs in your blood for some time. Or we’ll throw you back at that wretched snake,’ Sinbad said, annoyed at the man. ‘Now. We are looking for a stone. It’s shiny and has alphabets on it. Maybe you’ve seen it?’

Ragnar began to laugh. He pulled out a small piece of broken rock from his satchel. It gleamed and shone.

‘I believe this is what you are looking for.’

They had just found the first piece of the wonderstone.

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TWENTY-TWO

There it was.

What they had been looking for.

‘Okay,’ Sinbad said with a broad smile, ‘for saving your life, we would like to have that, my dear friend.’

Ragnar Lothbrok shook his head. ‘A rescue boat awaits me, so I shall be gone soon. Try to stop me and you shall face my wrath. I would have killed you Arabs the moment I saw you,’ he said disdainfully, ‘So be grateful you’re still alive. Think of it as a present from me for saving my life.’

Ashrafiyah had had enough. ‘I think I should just zap him, Sinbad, and take the stone.’ Tiny purple sparks began to emerge from her fingers.

‘No, no,’ Sinbad said hurriedly. ‘No zapping. I keep telling you guys, let’s use words. Talk. Words are powerful, far more powerful than spells and swords and—’

A rock hit Sinbad’s head mid-sentence. ‘What the . . .’

Ragnar was sprinting away from them.

‘So much for words . . .’ Ashrafiyah laughed.

‘Okay that didn’t go as planned. ‘Yeah, forget what I said. Let’s chase and beat him, this son of a Thor . . .’

They began to run after Ragnar, who seemed a little addled in the brain, as he was giggling and chuckling while sprinting away.

Ashrafiyah huffed, ‘I almost wish we didn’t heal him so well.’

‘It’s okay, my love,’ Sinbad smiled. ‘You learn from mistakes. Sometimes doing the right thing, well, doesn’t always benefit us.’

They entered a thicket and were immediately surrounded by tall trees, shrubs, rocks and broken twigs. Thick fog enveloped them. Their feet thudded against the wet soil, petrichor filling their lungs.

‘You’ll never catch me!’ Ragnar shouted from somewhere beyond the wall of mist.

‘But we need the stone to save the world,’ Sinbad desperately yelled back.

‘Is that so?’ the old man laughed. ‘That’s the lamest excuse one should never give.’

‘Why?’

‘Because the world is beyond saving, lad.’

Ashrafiyah skid and stopped, as the mist had gotten thicker. She conjured an orb that floated above her palm. It began to clear the mist as they followed Ragnar’s direction. He was moving to the eastern side of the island.

‘The world can go to pieces,’ came Ragnar’s voice, a little more loudly than last time. ‘All I want to do is save my son.’

Suddenly, a large sword appeared out of nowhere. Sinbad, quick on his reflexes, pulled out his thokcha sword and deflected, the two blades clanging against each other.

‘Son?’ Sinbad asked incredulously.

‘He’s ill,’ Ragnar said, his breath laboured as he pushed his sword against Sinbad’s. ‘Very ill. I need to give the shaman the stone so he can do what’s right.’

Sinbad pushed back. ‘The stone is not magical,’ he huffed. ‘Don’t you get it? That’s what got people in trouble in the first place. The stone has no magic. They just thought it did.’

‘You lie!’ the Viking thundered. ‘It emits energies.’

‘Of course it does. Because it’s part of an important ancient magical stone!’ Sinbad clamoured to explain. ‘Please, this is important to us.’

Suddenly, Sinbad felt his blade give way. Ragnar had disappeared into the mist. Ashrafiyah and Sinbad looked wildly around them. With their backs against each other’s, they circled, their eyes darting around.

‘Is there a way to clear this annoying mist?’ Sinbad barked.

‘I told you—the only way is to lift the curse from this place,’ Ashrafiyah said. ‘Now we know why the mist is here. Whenever there’s black magic, it’s prevalent.’

‘Oh, great. So no help—’

But before he could finish, there was another attack. A sword missed Sinbad’s face by inches. He kicked furiously in the direction of the attack and made contact with Ragnar’s abdomen. The Viking groaned.

‘Quick reflexes! But the mist is your enemy . . .’

He disappeared again.

‘Oh, c’mon! He’s just annoying me now,’ Ashrafiyah hissed as she created more orbs above her palms. ‘I’m going to zap him now and I dare you to stop me. So much for being good!’

‘No, please, be my guest. Forget about what I said. Anything for the stone.’

The next time Ragnar’s sword glinted at them, Ashrafiyah launched the orbs towards it. Ragnar plummeted back, disappearing behind the mist.

‘Finally! Now we just have to see where he fell.’

The two squinted as they moved against the thick fog.

‘Has he escaped again?’ seethed Ashrafiyah.

‘Doubtful,” Sinbad mouthed.

They heard murmurs.

Sinbad whispered, ‘He’s going to attack. Gear up.’

They turned, bracing for the incoming attack from the Viking—

But there stood the cold eyes of a serpent and a dragon.

‘Yeah,’ Sinbad said, swallowing hard, ‘that doesn’t look like Ragnar.’

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TWENTY-THREE

Sinbad should have run.

In fact, he should have run faster than he had ever done in this lifetime.

He should have, but he didn’t.

He stood frozen to the spot as he watched the serpent do what he couldn’t: find the ever-disappearing Ragnar. It tightly coiled itself around the man.

‘So now we just have to . . .’ Sinbad paused.

‘Come up with a plan,’ Ashrafiyah whispered. ‘They’re just staring at us. It’s creepy.’

‘I think we should . . .’ Sinbad was drawing a blank.

‘Oh well, I’m going to try something then. Just bear with me and close your eyes,’ Ashrafiyah said.

‘I don’t like this.’

‘Neither do I.’

She clapped her hands and white orbs flashed out of them. A blaze of blinding white light surrounded them.

The two creatures it seemed were now confused.

Sinbad lurched forward towards the snake, sword in hand, and stabbed its tail. Surprised by the attack, the snake

threw Ragnar to the ground. The man rolled over, while the stone tumbled out of his satchel. Sinbad grabbed it and sprinted for his life. ‘Ashrafiyah! To the boat!’ he screamed while running.

The two sprinted, the monstrous creatures breathing down their necks and snapping at their heels. ‘Just don’t look back,’ she yelled.

‘Why would I do that?’ he shouted back.

For what seemed hours and years of their lives, they ran. But the snake and the dragon were chasing them at breakneck speed, too.

‘I think I should talk to them. Make them understand—’

‘What is wrong with you?’ he shouted. ‘You hate talking. So, no. We are running. I don’t care how sad this island is . . . We need to get out! Where the in the deepest hells is our boat?’ Sinbad bellowed.

‘Hold on.’ Ashrafiyah snapped her fingers, letting a white orb rise from her palm. It flew above them, across the forest. ‘It should show us the shortest route.’

They stopped at a rickety, lopsided rope bridge, having finally shaken off the two creatures.

Sinbad looked at Ashrafiyah incredulously. ‘Hey,’ she said, ‘I never said it would be the safest. I said shortest route.’ She climbed on to it, holding the ropes tightly as she swayed.

‘That’s why they say, never chose a shortcut. It always comes with shortcomings.’ Sinbad stepped on it gingerly. He looked behind him and caught a glimpse of the monsters in the distance—they were coming. He looked below him: easily fifty feet to the ground. Beneath them lay a blanket of rocks and skeletons. ‘Seems like a shortcut to a painful death,’ he cried.

‘Hurry up!’ she screamed.

Sinbad inched along, while Ashrafiyah had almost reached the end. Just then the snake appeared, biting through one of the ropes behind him. But there was no sign of the dragon. Ashrafiyah jumped to the other side. ‘The dragon has disappeared it seems! Hurry now.’ she hollered.

‘I am trying!’ Sinbad screamed as the bridge swayed frenziedly.

One of the ropes now gave way, hurling Sinbad to one side. He tried to hold on, rope burns travelling down his arms. The snake slithered close now, coiling on rope which was still connected to bridge, trying to reach him and opening its mouth, ready to strike and eat him.

‘Get away from me, you smelly monster!’ Sinbad yelled, hanging from the bridge with one hand and thrusting his sword with the other. The snake slithered close.

The blade had hit the mark; the rope slit, and the snake let out a gut-wrenching hiss. It plummeted to the rocks below. Sinbad now swung from the ropes, against the face of the cliff.

He climbed up and as he neared the surface, he threw the satchel up to safety first.

Just as he was about to pull himself up over the ledge, Ragnar appeared out of nowhere. While still holding on to the ledge, Sinbad asked, ‘How did you get here?’

‘There was another route. A more concrete bridge.’ Ragnar grinned, holding his satchel. ‘Thanks for that. Now off with you.’ He kicked Sinbad’s hand mercilessly. ‘Go die, I said!’

Sinbad roared, searching for his partner frantically. Ragnar kicked his hand again. Blood began to pour from the wounds on Sinbad’s fingers. Sinbad roared in pain as he managed to pull himself up with one hand, using the other to punch

Ragnar’s leg. But Sinbad’s grip was loosening, and he was just about to fall when a piercing howl filled the air.

Ragnar was grabbed by the dragon’s claw.

He was shoved up in the air, ready to be eaten. Sinbad’s eyes searched for Ashrafiyah: she lay collapsed. It seemed that the dragon had used Ragnar’s route as well.

Ragnar, strangely, didn’t seem agitated or scared. Instead, he pulled out the stone from his bag and yelled. ‘Hurray!’

‘Bonkers this guy is,’ yelled Sinbad to himself. Using his blade, he cut the dragon’s talon. As he did so, the flesh of the creature seem to burn. The monster cried out in pain and loosened its grip on the Viking. Ragnar fell to the ground and started yelling happily.

‘What’s wrong with you, you stupid buffoon? Now put the stone down,’ Sinbad shouted. ‘It could kill them!’

‘These filths almost heralded a Ragnarok in my lifetime. I shall make them perish, and if this magical stone does it, so be it,’ Ragnar said.

Ragnar did the unthinkable. He stabbed the dragon as it rested against its injured talon. The creature squealed and bellowed, falling on the ground. Dead.

‘No!’ Ashrafiyah screamed, having regained consciousness.

Suddenly they heard a hiss behind them. They all turned. The snake had appeared using Ragnar’s other route. It now stared ahead of it, looking at the lifeless body of the dragon. And as it inched closer, it shook vigorously, its body convoluting. The serpent looked confused as to what was happening. But then, the most unusual thing happened: a tear dropped from its eyes . . .

Before it tuned into a naked human.

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TWENTY-FOUR

The man was old. Really old.

Wrinkled. Unsteady on his feet. Tired. And naked.

Garafena lay there for some time, near the dead dragon, the stone still plunged into it.

Ragnar was confused, he looked here and there. But the rest remained silent.

‘What happened?’ Ragnar finally asked, pulling out the stone from the dragon’s flesh. ‘What was that about?’

‘You broke their curse.’ Ashrafiyah rose to her feet, clutching her abdomen, which had a deep gash. ‘They didn’t want that, you idiot.’

Sinbad stepped forward, pulling off his tunic to cover the naked Garafena. The man was dead silent. But the man raised his arms to stop him.

‘You shouldn’t have done that,’ he whispered.

‘What?’

‘You . . . you people. You come here for greed, but you trample our island and expect us to take kindly to it.’ Garafena’s voice was now clear and stern. ‘This is our home.

How would you like it if strangers with weapons appeared out of nowhere and threatened?'

'We're here to do the right thing,' Sinbad protested.

'You killed Gagana.' Garafena shook his head. 'For so long, I protected him, and you killed him.' His voice shook with pain.

'I . . . I . . .' Sinbad looked flummoxed.

Ashrafiyah came forward. 'We apologize. We didn't know.'

'Ignorance is a man's folly, not a woman's.' He looked at her sharply. 'Why didn't you stop him?'

'I didn't know the whole story . . . I still don't. You could have lived a good life, but you chose to be trapped in the body of a monster. Why?'

'Because of love.' Garafena shook with grief. 'I loved Gagana . . . We were lovers.'

A jolt went through Sinbad's spine.

'The village headman found out about us and threatened to ruin our reputation by planting malicious stories about us. We both knew Gagana was dying. I was trying to help, but it was fruitless. It was beyond us . . . This curse . . . though it turned us into these vile creatures, it made us immortal.' Tears flowed down his wrinkled face. 'And now he's . . . he's dead.'

That's why they didn't kill each other. Because if they would have, they wouldn't have each other to live with.

The old man looked up in pain. 'Tell me. What is life without the one you love?' It's nothing. So, we chose to live as monsters . . . as long as we lived with each other."

Ashrafiyah clenched her jaw. 'I am so sorry for what we've caused.'

Ragnar remained silent, his head down.

'I have no purpose now. None whatsoever,' the old man said, crying freely. 'I don't know what I will do without . . . I

don’t know how I will live my life after this. It will haunt me forever . . . the fact that I let him die . . .’

A long silence followed.

Garafena looking into the distance, finally said, ‘I hope you don’t live to see your love slip away from you. Especially after all you did for them to live. True love is what helps us going in this life.’

The old man straightened up and inched near the cliff. And just before Ashrafiyah could comprehend or grab him, he walked over to the edge of the cliff.

Ashrafiyah instantly lurched forward and grabbed his hand before he could hit the rocks.

‘Let me go, child. Let me be at peace. It’s time for me too.’

‘You have so much to live for,’ Ashrafiyah cried out, horrified.

Sinbad rushed over to them and thrust his arm forward too. He turned back to see that Ragnar was slipping away into the forest, the stone in his hand.

‘Why aren’t you going? Chase him,’ Ashrafiyah said.

‘No, I should be here. With you.’ Sinbad smiled weakly.

Ashrafiyah realized that at that moment he was being her friend, not her captain. She turned back to Garafena, who was strangely heavy given his frail old body. ‘Please pull yourself up,’ she pleaded.

‘No. Thank you for trying to save me. But no. It is time.’

He jerked his hand away from hers. The man fell to his death.

Sinbad looked down, horrified.

The two stood in silence, with their backs to the cliff, marking the man’s life. Ashrafiyah rested her head on his shoulder, and Sinbad heard her muffled sobs.

In that painful moment, he truly felt that perhaps love did exist in this world.

‘You should leave,’ she said, gulping back a sob. ‘He’s not that far away. I’ll catch up.’

Sinbad nodded. He grabbed hold of his girdle and made a run towards the direction Ragnar had gone into. He could see the footprints in the mud and the broken vines the Viking had trudged on.

Ragnar ran until his lungs began to give up. His body was exhausted, but his thoughts continued run. He was thinking about all the big moments of his life: the ones who he had lost, the ones he had loved, the ones he could never have, the ones who were sacrificed . . .

His vision began to blur, and his breath grew ever more ragged, but he had almost reached the shore.

Ragnar collapsed.

Confusion clouded his mind. As he fell, he saw the cloaked Nephilim, with alabaster skin and bald heads, circling him, their blades flashing.

‘Hey!’ Sinbad shouted, unsheathing his own sword. He looked confused and afraid seeing the demon’s army.

Before he could leap and attack, he felt a thud across the back of his head. He fell over, rolling onto his back. His eyes flickered open; two figures towered over him. The red-haired woman and someone with a cane . . .

Sakhr.

‘He reached before us. That is not good.’ The voice was reedy and menacing. It had a lethal quality to it.

‘Yes. Our men saw his buddy too.’ Worry laced the words spoken by the red-haired woman. She sounded a little scared.

‘Find that *buddy* and get the boy up.’ And then the man looked at him with eyes made of fire and fury and of complete darkness. ‘I believe it’s time for my conversation with him.’

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TWENTY-FIVE

When Sinbad awoke, he smelled sulphur.

That meant demons were close by.

It was a dark room, the air heavy with dark magic. Sinbad felt somewhat alien here. He immediately felt that something was off and that something magical was at work.

‘Something about you has always amused me, my dear.’

Sinbad couldn’t see where the reedy voice was coming from, but he heard the tap of a cane.

‘Would you like a glass of mead?’

‘I’m underage.’

‘And yet you have the mettle of a man twice your age.’

‘Who are you?’ Sinbad asked through gritted teeth. ‘And where’s Ashrafiyah?’

‘Your friend is right here on my ship.’ The man stepped forward with a goblet in his hand. He was tall, almost twice Sinbad’s height, with pale blue skin and a surprisingly handsome face. He wore a long coat and his hair in a ponytail. He smiled, a twinkle in his eye. ‘And you should be glad we are dropping you to your ship. We don’t want your crew to get worried, after all.’

‘Where’s Ragnar?’

‘Oh, he’s still on the island. He’ll be fine when he wakes up.’

‘You didn’t kill him?’

‘Why would I? I don’t believe in purposeless deaths. I find them . . . well . . . purposeless.”

Odd thing. Must not be savage or sadistic.

The Admiral sat on a chair, his cane resting atop his thigh. He grunted as he twisted his limp leg on top of the other. Then he sipped his wine, his smile still dancing.

‘Sinbad . . . what a lovely face you have, my friend!’

If his hands and legs weren’t bound, Sinbad would have knocked the Admiral’s lights out. He looked defitently at the demon.

But Sakhr was calm. With uncharacteristically kind eyes, Sinbad noticed. If it wasn’t for his demon heritage, Sinbad could even thought of befriending him. *He even looks weirdly different for a demon . . . at least, different from Azrael. That one had a super villain look on his face.*

‘And what a lovely story you hold,’ he continued. ‘Young boy, destined for greatness, falls in love with the devil’s daughter and champions the seven seas. Right out of the storybooks you read as a kid, no? You know, when I was told to lead this mission, my overlord said you would be a problem.’ He casually leaned forward as if reminiscing to a friend. ‘But the more I learnt about you, the more impressed I was. You are an earnest boy. Cautious, curious, intelligent.’ He paused. ‘You should have joined me. I respect you.’

‘I know you, Sakhr. You are trying to strike a chord with me so you can use me later on. But know this, I would never side with Iblis.’

Sakhr nodded. ‘I have had so many opportunities to kill you. But I choose not to because I think you will join us.

Eventually. You just need to know the truth.’

‘And what is that?’ Sinbad snapped irritated of the mind games.

‘That the world is corrupt. It’s ruled by the tentacles of the guild that you all love so much. And we need a change. Iblis is that change.’

‘Iblis wants to eradicate all humans.’

‘I was a human once, my friend. And I loved being one. I was turned into a demon because of my actions, but I miss being a man. Iblis is just like us. He needs guidance, and I told him, mortals are useful. Monsters and mortals can live together instead of hunting each other. The guild has corrupted everything. We can rid it. Iblis understands that now.’

Sinbad clenched his jaw. Sakhr was lying, of course. Iblis didn’t care. He was callous. He wanted to destroy everything and create a new world with his kind. But somewhere, inside Sinbad, the words of Sakhr rung true. He knew Sakhr was right about the guild’s corruption.

‘You could be right, but I don’t trust Iblis,’ he said.

Sakhr nodded. ‘I get it. You have trust issues. Why wouldn’t you? You have lived your entire life, betrayed. Your parents abandoned you. Your master betrayed you. And now the only family you have is your crew. You cling on to them. Imagine if they weren’t as saintly as you think they are. Imagine if they had secrets of their own.’ He sipped from his goblet.

‘What are you talking about?’ Sinbad looked up.

Sakhr smiled sweetly, though it didn’t reach his eyes. ‘I have spies everywhere. So I have it on good authority that most of your crew want to leave. This is their last mission.’

‘You’re lying. You—’

‘No, I’m being truthful,’ Sakhr replied calmly. ‘I have no intention to lie to you. ‘They want to leave because they don’t think it makes sense to stay with you in the long run. They have a life. Beyond this.’

Sinbad knew they did. Ashrafiyah wanted to travel the world. Markus wanted to return to his family. Even Safeena had a former lover.

‘But most of all, you don’t know your closest ally—Husayn, right? He enlisted himself in the Royal Guard of the caliphate.’ Sakhr reached into the pocket of his coat, pulling out a sheet of papyrus. ‘His letter of request. He also wants to move on. Seems like everyone is afraid of telling you.’

Sinbad blinked. He didn’t know what to believe.

He’s playing games with your head. Don’t listen to him.

The Admiral seemed to read his mind. ‘I have letters and papers from everyone in the crew. Pressa wants to leave for China and study the new culinary arts. Idris wants to be with her husband . . . you get the picture. I know your entire crew, Sinbad. More than you, it looks like.’

Sakhr looked at him pityingly. ‘The first thing to do with your enemy is research. See what goes through their mind. People attack. They move. They jump. But observation is key to winning any battle. And I did it, only to discover that there is no battle to fight with you. You are already losing. Say you even get the wonderstone, which we have now, you still don’t have your crew. They’re just going to leave. Exactly the way your parents left you. You will be abandoned yet again.’

Sinbad looked at Sakhr, tearing up. He had never felt so cheated and hurt. He felt as if his heart had sunk in and as if someone had poked, snatched it out and beaten it. ‘You’re a real piece of work, you know,’ he managed to choke out.

Sakhr stood. He walked over to a table in the corner and lit a candle. Its fragrance filled the room and Sinbad began to feel dizzy. The demon limped close to him and tapped his shoulder. ‘The candle that burns shall put you in a deep slumber. You’ll wake up in your boat with your friend,’ Sakhr announced. ‘The boat will be close to your ship. I am keeping the wonderstone with me. You need to speak to your team before you chase your next target. I hope you clear your differences.’

Sinbad groggily said, ‘Your leg. When a human turns into a demon, they become perfect. Immortal. Invincible. They are given a new life. Yet, your leg is wounded. Why?’

There was a pause, a flicker of uncertainty, as if this question had poked through the cold veneer of the demon. Sakhr’s perfect smile faltered for only a moment. ‘My friend, when you go through life, you realize that there are a few wounds one must carry as a burden forever.’ He paused. ‘It reminds them to stay humble, not letting the ego get the better of them. Have a good sleep. I hope to see you soon and I hope you shall drink the mead next time.’

There were few more words, but Sinbad was already getting enveloped in the blanket of darkness.

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TWENTY-SIX

Sinbad had been silent on the way back to his ship.

He had woken up in his boat alone with Ashrafiyah. He had a jar of water and loaves of wheat bread. Sakhr had made sure he was comfortable. Even he wouldn't have treated his enemy as well as Sakhr did. Ashrafiyah had woken up in a daze too, and they both rowed back. The ship that belonged to Sakhr had disappeared.

'What did they ask you?' Ashrafiyah asked. She looked confused and sad. It seemed like she had gone through a turbulent phase with the red-haired woman.

'Nothing. He just played with my head. Trying to get to me.'

'He could have killed us. He had us by the throat and he could have finished us, but he didn't.'

'I have a feeling he likes that.'

'What?'

'The power of being able to kill someone but not doing it.'

'He's crazy.'

'He didn't seem it, though.'

'Why?'

‘Because he was kind. Kinder than most people I have met in my life. Exhibit A.’ He pointed to the water jar before sipping from it.

‘Could be poisonous.’

‘No, not his style. What did he ask you?’

‘I didn’t meet him. It was the red-haired woman for me. She’s quite a pain in the ass.’ Ashrafiyah grimaced. ‘This is not what I signed up for. Azrael was a threat, but this maniac . . . I think he wants us to chase him. It’s like a game.’

‘So you want to leave?’ Sinbad couldn’t hide his chagrin. ‘Move on?’

She clenched her jaw. ‘What are you trying to say, love? If I wanted to “move on”, I would have done it a while ago.’ She paused. ‘The bloody creatures of the island made me realize that people *do* find love and a sense of belongingness . . . All this does exist. I have found friendship with you.’

I know. And I, too, had found love once.

They had almost reached the ship when she said, ‘Thank you.’

‘For what?’

‘For staying back. You could have gone after Ragnar. But you didn’t. So thank you for staying back. For being with me. It makes me think . . . You have grown up, Sinbad. Matured much faster than I anticipated. You acted like a true leader.’

Sinbad just nodded as he grabbed hold of the hooks that were thrown down by his crewman. He tied them to the boat, and they were pulled up by his team. Back on his deck—safe and sound, despite the wounds and bruises.

The crew surrounded him, ready to launch questions.

‘Let’s talk. My lodge.’

When he reached the lodge, he tore away his waistcoat and threw it away in the corner. He then wiped his face and sat on his chair, just watching his crew enter.

Markus, Ashrafiyah, Husayn, Pressa, Safeena and Idris. They all were just standing in silence.

‘By the empty hands you both possess, I believe the mission went badly,’ Idris said once they were all inside.

‘Quite horrendous would be a more accurate description,’ Ashrafiyah said.

‘Sakhr sounds like he knows what he’s doing,’ Idris said once Sinbad had recounted their tale. ‘I’m sure he must have a reason for letting you and Ashrafiyah go.’

‘Or maybe he likes me?’ Sinbad chuckled at his own joke, despite nobody else laughing. ‘Or maybe he wants something from me.’

‘Like what?’ Husayn asked.

Sinbad didn’t respond. He couldn’t believe Husayn—his trusted friend—had found his place in the Royal Guard or applied without telling him. He could barely look him in the eye. He felt hollow inside.

Sinbad wanted to speak about what Sakhr had said to him—about not trusting people and interrogating his friends—but he stayed mum. He now looked at all of them with an eye of suspicion.

‘He has the first wonderstone, but he’s slow,’ he said about Sakhr. ‘And he’s taking his time. We should fly the ship to the Arctic and search for the cultists Anansi told us about. There are three parts to the wonderstone and he can’t complete the tablet with just one. So we have still not lost.’

‘I’ll direct the sails,’ said Markus, leaving the room hurriedly.

‘I should go next time,’ Idris said. ‘Sakhr seems like a piece of work.’

‘You don’t have to babysit me,’ Sinbad snapped to everyone’s surprise. ‘I’m fine. I think I’ll take Pressa next time. She doesn’t crib that much.’

‘Have you forgotten everything about me, captain boy?’ she asked, astonished.

‘I’m just kidding, but yes, more teams on ground for the next one. We need backup this time.’

They all began filing out of the room.

Only Safeena remained.

Sinbad was busying himself with the papers, charts and books that he had left scattered on his desk when she spoke.

‘You don’t sound like yourself.’

‘Hmm? Oh, you didn’t leave *and* you care? Two things I’m surprised by.’

‘What’s going on with you? You were jovial, nice, sweet. And all of a sudden you are this . . . ball of frustration and anger. What happened?’

Sinbad arched his brows. ‘I thought I should put on a happy face for my crew. Reassure them. But I was wrong. I shouldn’t have cared. I should have just show everyone what I truly feel.’

She smiled wanly as she leaned against the table. ‘Sinbad, being a leader doesn’t mean you need to be brave all the time. It also means having the courage to embrace your fear.’

‘Pearls of wisdom from someone so young and inexperienced with life. Someone who’s never been a leader. Or has she? I didn’t even know you were in love, so . . .’

‘Sinbad . . .’

‘No, it’s fine. I’m sorry, I’m being bratty. It’s best we avoid each other.’ He went back to studying one of his journals.

But she still stood there. ‘I was, um, young when I met him. I’m still young, but I was immature. He taught me a lot about life. I met him when I was stationed in one of the cities in search of the trumpet. He was young too, carefree. I loved it. All so whimsical. Someone who didn’t take himself too seriously.’

‘I don’t want to hear about him, Safeena. I know he must mean a lot to you, but I don’t want to hear,’ Sinbad said, anger building up inside him.

‘You should, Sinbad,’ she said with force. ‘You should because you should know what *happened* to him.’

He scoffed. ‘I don’t care.’

‘You should.’ Tears threatened to spill from her eyes. ‘Because he died.’

Sinbad looked up. ‘How?’

‘Because of me.’

She stormed out of the room.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

He was trying his best to stay away from the team.

He had stationed them and told them what to do before retiring to his room. Contemplating. Gazing. All in silence. He would watch the ceiling and sway with the gentle movement of his ship. He was lonely. Empty. Isolated from the world. It was strange to feel this alienated from those he considered family. It seemed like even in the future, where he could do all kinds of daring adventures, he still wouldn’t find anyone who would make him feel complete.

The one person who did . . .was no more his.

Safeena’s words played on repeat in his mind. What had she meant her lover had died because of her? Had the guild been right about her all along? Now that she had revealed all this, he couldn’t stop his thoughts. Was she actually sinister? Evil from within? She didn’t even tell him enough. Why? There was a part of him that wanted to talk to her, but she felt so distant, so cold.

Sinbad suddenly felt chilly. He pulled his blanket close to him. They were now in the north, and here the cold tended to get inside the bones.

Sinbad hated the cold. Blocked nose. Sore throat. You could get all sorts of nagging and ridiculous health problems in the winters.

He now brought his thoughts back to the main problem at hand—Sakhr.

Perhaps Sakhr had been right. Maybe I should have joined him. At least I would be on the winning side.

Sinbad felt cornered. At this point, only the determined caliph of Baghdad seemed trustworthy.

As he pondered, the boat rocked forward on the choppy ocean waters. They now moved farther up north. The closer they got to the Arctic, the colder the wind grew, whipping against their sails. They knew the gale would throw them off course if they flew, so they had descended back to the water and stalled their plans of flying to the region.

A knock on the door interrupted Sinbad's thoughts. 'Come in!'

Husayn popped his head round the door. 'She sees something.'

'You sure?'

'Damn sure.' The way he said it, something felt off.

Sinbad hurriedly threw on his coat, scarf and boots, carrying his blanket with him, and raced to the deck, where a crowd had gathered. The waters were choppy, and the wind howled around them. Pressa's body was contorting, and her eyes had rolled into the back of her head. She had gone pale.

'I see it. There's . . . there's something strange in that archipelago.' She pointed to the group of icy islands, its mountains shooting nine thousand feet into the air. 'More than strange, I feel there's something ancient here. Something that doesn't belong. Something alien. I see . . . I see . . . blood and there's an underground cavern and

there’s danger.’ She blinked, her eyes back to normal, and wiped the blood from her nose. She shivered despite the many layers of clothing she wore.

Sinbad had told her to check out the new place where they were headed to. He had eventually noticed how Anansi’s information was very vague, and so he had decided to follow this out-of-the-box method to see if Pressa could find out more about the archipelago. But the way she had described it, had frightened everyone.

‘You heard her, everyone,’ said Sinbad. ‘Stop the ship at the shore and descend. Create a ten-mile radius and station Ashrafiyah’s witch bombs on each side. They’ll blow up if anyone approaches our ship. All hand’s on deck from now on.’

They all nodded seriously, a little taken aback at Sinbad’s stern demeanor.

He walked over to Pressa and put his blanket around her shoulders. ‘I think you need a hot cup of cocoa.’

She gave a weak smile.

Sinbad rounded his arm around her as they walked back to the lodge.

‘I can’t believe I’m doing all this nonsense for you, boy.’

‘Am I that bad?’

‘I don’t think I’m going to flatter you.’ She breathed hard.

Sinbad poured some cocoa milk with honey in a cup and gave it to her.

‘So. Everything’s fine?’

Pressa looked up from her cup. ‘I don’t have a good feeling about this, Sinbad.’

She had said his name—that meant she was scared. And Pressa, regardless of her diminutive stature was hardly scared of most things.

‘Why do you say so?’

‘There’s something here I couldn’t touch. Couldn’t feel. Something lies frozen here. Something that isn’t human.’

‘Pressa, we’ve been dealing with inhuman things for a while now, so it shouldn’t be a surprise.’

‘No.’ She tensed up. ‘It’s something that doesn’t belong to *this* world.’

‘You think it came from . . . from another galaxy?’

She licked her lips. Ignoring what he had just said. ‘I should have just gone and been with my mother and my brother.’

Sinbad raised his brows. ‘What happened?’

‘I met them in Baghdad, you know. They were happy. They were content. And while you were frolicking around, I had a good lunch with them, catching up.’

‘Nice to hear you have my back,’ he sarcastically added.

She ignored it. ‘I realized how important family is. I have one, but I keep running away from them.’

Sinbad bit his lip. He suddenly felt very lonely like he had no one in the world.

‘Why do you do that? Keep running away?’

‘I don’t know. Probably because I’m an idiot.’ She shrugged. ‘I started off working in Basra because I wanted to stay away from the mundanity of Baghdad. The safest city to be in. Basra was filled with strange people and stranger situations. You and Husayn, for one. Even more than that, it was about exploring the unknown. I wanted to earn enough from the stupid tavern and travel the seven seas in search of uncharted realms. Forget about my family. You know my history with my father. And I could keep sending money to my brother and my mother.’

‘And that’s why you’re here?’

‘Yes. I flickered for a moment back in Baghdad, but I believe . . . I belong here.’

Sinbad smiled. ‘I was worried people would leave me and the ship.’

She looked at him with a sad smile. ‘You won’t get away from me any time soon, captain boy. But I do plan to have my own ship eventually. Become the most fearsome pirate to ever live!’

‘I’m sure,’ Sinbad said with a laugh. ‘Did you know Husayn tried to join the Royal Guard?’

‘Oh, *gaisi*! Really? That traitorous scum.’

‘Yeah, well.’

‘Probably wants to follow in his father’s footsteps.’

Sinbad had almost forgotten that Husayn’s father had been in the army, and had died a hero in the Battle of Zab. He was so wrapped up in himself that he had forgotten about Husayn and his previous life.

‘Should we talk to him about it?’ she asked.

‘No, no. I’ll do it myself.’

There was a knock at the door. It was one of Markus’s men. ‘Captain, we’ve found something.’

‘I really hope that it’s the wonderstone.’

‘It’s really not.’

Sinbad sighed and made his way to the deck along with Pressa. His men had safely docked the ship. The ropes were tied, the planks laid out, and a group of crewmembers had begun to circle the ship to protect it.

Sinbad and Pressa followed the man off the ship. They walked for a few minutes before Pressa asked: ‘Who in the *diyu* thought of dropping the wonderstone here?’

‘Maybe it was an accident. Tracing these things can be quite a pain in the rear.’

They soon found Markus, Idris, Husayn and the others huddled together. They were staring straight ahead of them.

Sinbad followed their gaze, and a chill ran down his spine.

Dozens of corpses—humans, mules and dogs—littered the ground, all charred, slaughtered and severed. They seemed to belong to an expedition party. He saw the singed remains of an orange-and-yellow flag. It looked familiar.

‘Tang dynasty,’ Pressa whispered, referring to the Chinese Empire. ‘What were they doing out *here*?’

‘Probably searching for the same thing we are,’ Idris said.

‘And it didn’t end well for them, sweethearts,’ Ashrafiyah added.

‘What makes us think it will end well for us?’ Husayn asked.

Sinbad remained silent. He was suddenly afraid. Pressa turned to face him. ‘I should have told you.’

‘What?’ The cold turned every breath into fog.

‘When I said what I felt was out of this world, I meant it’s not part of the world we live in. It’s ancient.’

‘I know, you told me.’

‘No.’ She shook her head. ‘When I said alien and ancient, I meant whatever exists here was born when the world had *just* been created.’

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TWENTY-EIGHT

‘Gather round, everyone,’ Sinbad ordered.

The crew looked at Sinbad so expectantly that he almost tripped on his words, his tongue twisted.

Get a grip. They aren’t running away from you right now.

He was nervous. First, his insecurities were boiling up within him and now the scene of the dozen Chinese corpses. Pressa’s pale face had spoken too much without words. *If this ancient thing could survive the test of time, what was it even made of?*

Not even his codex had come in handy. As a child, he had kept a record of all the creatures he was warned of, all the tales he heard from fairies, all the spells a Seid is taught. He called it the codex, and it had multiple pages.

‘Let’s canvas the entire perimeter of this archipelago. Idris, you go north. Take a few people with you. Markus and Ashrafiyah, you handle the east. I’ll take the south with Pressa. Let’s put up some camps and figure out what the hell is going on.’

They all silently began to pick up their bags and weapons. As Sinbad did so too, he found Husayn, his scrawny friend,

trudging up to him. Ready to go along.

‘Where do you think you are setting off to?’ Sinbad asked.

‘With you, of course.’

‘Oh, um, I believe Idris will require your help. I have Pressa, so it’s all right.’

Husayn knitted his brows in confusion. He sensed it that there was something bothering Sinbad. ‘But Pressa can go with her.’

‘Pressa is troubled, Husayn. I think I should be with her.’ The young girl was sitting on a rock, Sinbad’s blanket wrapped around her.

Husayn wanted to say more. Ask Sinbad what was going on with him. But he just shrugged and didn’t bother; Sinbad had been perpetually stern and indifferent since he returned. A frown formed on his face, and he departed with Idris.

Sinbad walked up to Pressa, who had happened to hear their conversation.

‘Ah, what happened, boy?’

‘Nothing,’ Sinbad shrugged, pulling out a dagger from his rucksack. ‘Here, for you.’

‘I’m not a weapons person. In fact, I shouldn’t even be going.’

‘Oh, shut up.’

‘No, you shut up. I want to stay.’

‘I need you out there, Pressa. Only you can detect the energies of this place.’

‘I don’t know how. I was happy when all I could do was see the future.’

‘Seers, powerful ones, can also detect energies. Only a few, though. Can you see into the future and tell me what’s going to happen to us?’

‘Don’t ask me to do that.’

‘Why?’ he asked, irritated.

‘Because I have a feeling we will die. We will rot here, Sinbad.’ She shivered. ‘I am scared. So I will not see any more futures for you. You can save your requests. You should be happy that I’m going with you.’

Sinbad had never seen such a courageous girl be so afraid, but he nodded glumly. They began to move with a bunch of Markus’s men, venturing towards the south, bracing themselves against the winds. He constantly felt like eyes were watching them, like a shadow was following, but when he would turn around to check, the feeling would disappear. Shadows shimmered behind Sinbad and he felt them speaking to him. It had now started to get very confusing and scary.

They took a break when they reached a frozen lake. There shards of ice were just floating away, nonchalantly, in the deathly cold water.

Everyone, it seemed, was mentally exhausted. It was all too bleak. Everyone just stayed silent and stared into the distance. Sinbad nursed his flask of hot cocoa, looking at the frozen wasteland. The aurora borealis—green, purple and blue—danced overhead. There seemed to be no sign of life around him, just hills on which reflected the fusion of colours. It all made the place too mystical.

He spotted someone at the far end of the lake. He looked familiar. Sinbad starined his eyes. There was a man for sure. Tall. Pale blue. Silver grey hair tied behind his head. A cane in one hand.

A voice whispered in Sinbad’s ear, ‘Join me.’

The figure vanished.

Stop it! He was overthinking things. He shook his head, eyes squeezed shut.

But two new figures appeared in the distance when Sinbad opened his eyes. Figures with long fangs, hooded cloaks and strange masks, feasting on a dead horse.

‘Are you seeing what I’m seeing?’ Sinbad asked.

Pressa strained her eyes. ‘By heavens and hells, are those what I think they are?’

‘They’re not wolves.’

‘Yeah. Cannibals.’ She swallowed hard.

The two figures stood up and took aim with their spears. ‘We should . . .we should leave.’ Sinbad said, hurriedly. ‘Run,’ he ordered.

Everyone began to scamper. But more hooded creatures lay in wait. Many were riding polar bears and holding large spears, which they now launched at the crew.

Sinbad dodged, but one plunged into the chest of one of his men, instantly killing him. The rest scrambled as spears rained on them. Pressa cried loudly, as Sinbad held her by the hand and made way to the opposite side.

‘There’s the water on this side. We’re going to die!’ Pressa screamed.

Sinbad didn’t wait for her to stop. He took her by the hand and jumped onto an ice floe. A hooded figure fast approached on his polar bear and jumped from the animal onto the snow-covered land. The animal began to screech loudly, somehow afraid to enter the waters, while the hooded figure got down fearlessly. His eyes locked with Sinbad’s as he jumped onto another ice floe, towards the two of them.

‘Put your weight in front and try to direct it towards the other end of the shores,’ Sinbad told Pressa.

‘We’re going to die! Frozen!’ she yelled.

‘If you keep screaming like this, I’ll go deaf first and then die. Look out—’

The figure jumped onto their ice floe, and Sinbad instantly pulled out his sword. They began to spar, Sinbad deflecting the figure's attacks. He noticed the torn mask and the burnt face behind it. It was a symbol—a sigil of a cross with an infinity symbol cutting through it. Sinbad had never seen something like this. He wavered for a moment and the figure trumped him, throwing a quick jab at his feet. Sinbad fell on the hard ice. The figure didn't lose a moment and jabbed at Sinbad again, who now kicked the figure hard on the feet. Then using the hilt of his sword, he shoved the figure, sending him tumbling into the icy water. The figure struggled against the currents, crying out loud. He tried to grab on to the ice floes around, but the currents were too strong, and they pulled him underwater.

'Well, that was a close call,' Sinbad said, peering down.

'Let's not have any more of them—is what I would have said,' Pressa said. 'But I believe we would be disappointed if I'd said that.'

'What do you mean?'

'I couldn't properly see earlier because of the mist, but I believe someone awaits us.'

Sinbad swivelled to face the shore.

A group stood together, watching the pair as if they were some kind of a grand spectacle. Sinbad noticed their orange-and-yellow flags. It was of the very party that they met with outside—the corpses. The Chinese. In the centre stood a tall woman in a fur jacket, her red hair closely cropped, a black eyepatch over her left eye. She had an army of soldiers on either side.

'Oh, we have company,' she said with a smile when Sinbad and Pressa stumbled off the ice floe. 'It's nice to meet you. My name is Dr Fang. I'm an emissary of the Tang Empire.'

She was more than that; Sinbad had heard about Dr Fang. She was a legend. An insanely fearless explorer, a crazy maverick, an intelligent alchemist. She was a woman who had defined the word ‘adventure’ for many. It was common knowledge that she carried out research for several Chinese emperors.

But most of all—she was immortal.

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TWENTY-NINE

The mythical, the legendary, Dr. Fang.

Sinbad walked alongside her now. They dismounted the fur-clad horses and Dr Fang petted her steed. She began walking, straight with her head high. She had a chilling air of confidence about her, one that Sinbad could only dream for. The woman was a goddess, a warrior, someone who had stood the test of time.

The Chinese soldiers had formed a small camp, marked by their hoisted flag. They sat there sharpening blades, warming their hands over a fire and roasting food for themselves. Pressa was grinning widely; she was in awe to see so many people from her home country. Dr Fang halted and turned to her men, speaking to them in Mandarin—about the expedition, Sinbad figured. Though he didn't understand the language, but seeing her talk and the men's reaction, she sounded like a true leader.

Sinbad had heard that Dr Fang had quite the vivacious personality. She seemed to have an exciting past, according to what stories conveyed. She had turned immortal through alchemy—through a freak accident no less. The story went

that a potion she had created, during the time she was trying out alchemy, she tested on herself. It had preserved her youth forever. Figuring she had all the time in the world, she turned her attention to mysteries that had long fascinated her and now wanted to uncover the secrets of the universe. She had helped the Ninurta Guild of Baghdad as well; Harun al-Rashid's predecessor had called her as an ambassador when things were cordial between the Tang dynasty and the Abbasid caliphate. Now, there was a brewing cold war.

The Chinese soldiers shot daggers at Sinbad.

I don't feel at home here. So much the warm welcome.

'People don't like me here,' he said out loud.

'Yes, they should not. You hold traitors' blood. Why would they like you?' Dr Fang grinned, slapping his back. 'Do not fret, boy. Rest in front of the fire,' she said, nudging him near the open fire. 'Would you like some ale?'

'No, thank you,' Sinbad said politely.

'I would like some, please,' Pressa said equally politely.

'No, she wouldn't,' cut in Sinbad. 'She's just delirious.'

Dr Fang laughed as Pressa shot a look at Sinbad. It seemed that Pressa was all taken in by the great explorer. While Dr Fang had addressed her troops, Sinbad had quickly briefed Pressa about Dr Fang's great exploits.

'She's so cool.' Pressa had said, her eyes like saucers. 'And she has an eye patch. How cool is that?'

Dr Fang sat on a log, facing Sinbad and the roaring fire. 'And what is a young Arab doing here in the cold? Aren't you two too far north for your own liking?'

Sinbad pursed his lips. He didn't want to reveal anything.

'We have been sent on a mission by the caliph of Baghdad to search for a missing tablet,' Pressa blurted out.

Sinbad eyed her with annoyance.

‘Ah, the stone.’ Dr Fang smiled. ‘I’ve heard of it. It’s what they worship.’

‘Who?’ Sinbad asked.

‘The cultists, of course. The ones you were dealing with on the ice floe out there. We were out to kill them and you helped us, so thank you.’ She sipped her ale. ‘They worship the Old One.’

‘The Old One?’

‘The sigil they bore, it represents something ancient and . . . evil. Yes, that would be right word—evil. I have been sent by the emperor to see if we find anything fishy out here. We were worried there could be more to all this than what meets the eye, something that could pose a threat to the nation, maybe even lead to world-ending circumstances. And so, here I am,’ she said pleasantly.

Okay, that’s too much information. Unasked, voluntary information. Sinbad thought.

‘What is the Old One?’ he asked aloud.

She arched her brows. ‘I wish I could tell you. These cultists, they were fishermen up north, even pirates and scavengers. They all burnt themselves when they laid their eyes on the stone, created a temple of sorts underneath the land we sit on. The Old One tells them to feast on flesh—animal and human—I believe that is what you witnessed. They do so willingly, at the orders of their god.’

‘The Old One . . . if it’s so powerful and evil, why doesn’t it leave this place?’ Pressa asked.

Dr Fang gave her a sharp look. ‘You are a seer, aren’t you?’

‘How did you know?’ Pressa asked excitedly.

‘I’ve lived long enough to notice these things. I have an eye for it,’ she pointed to her eye and laughed. ‘I would love to have a seer on board with us.’

Pressa chuckled. She turned to Sinbad. ‘You realize what she did there right? The eye thing? She has *an* eye for it. She’s hilarious!’

Dr Fang smiled at Pressa before turning to Sinbad. ‘It’s been a while since I was in your land, the magnificent east. How is the young caliph? Dandy? Tell you something. I’ll make a trip down there, see if he requires anything. I’ve brought the guild so many of the artefacts I’ve excavated, I’m sure they remember me fondly. I’ve even put myself in danger for the guild. Ah, the guild—a trip down memory lane, that one.’

Sinbad politely smiled.

Dr Fang seemed to be talking a lot. It didn’t seem to sit right with him. *Maybe she was just talkative and liked chit-chatting*, he reasoned. After all, she was a world-famous explorer and had many stories to tell.

Sinbad’s mind drifted to one—According to legend, she didn’t believe in falling in love. She thought it was a waste of her time. But then something happened. It was during the time when she was working as a maiden in Emperor Han Wu Ti’s court, in the Han Dynasty, hundreds of years earlier and was friends to one of his spouses. Dr Fang was simple maiden then who had learnt the secrets of alchemy in her free time, finding the insides of the library which held the secret possession. While people would fear about alchemy, she embraced and risked it, finally gaining eternal life. She even had fallen in love they said, and had to go through a lot to reach here, finally.

‘Yes, indeed. You should visit,’ said Sinbad.

‘Tell you what,’ she slapped her knees and stood up ‘help me get rid of these bloody cultists down at the temple and the book is yours when we find it.’

The book? ‘It’s not a book. It’s a stone . . . tablet . . . Wait. Where is the temple? Where is the stone? They’re *here*?’ Sinbad looked confused.

‘Oh yes, my boy. We identified it,’ she said excitedly. ‘We must discover what mysteries it holds. How about if Pressa joins me inside and you stay and keep watch? You can protect us!’

Sinbad narrowed his gaze.

Something’s not right. Why would she want a powerful Seid like me to be outside when the threat is in *the temple?*

‘Pressa wouldn’t be—’

‘Would love to, my lady.’ Pressa jumped up and bowed a little. ‘It’s always good to learn from someone like you. You’ve made the Chinese proud. It will be my pleasure to assist you . . . My honour.’

Dr Fang smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

‘Why do you need us?’ Sinbad asked gruffly. ‘You already have a team big enough to wipe out this entire place.’

She shrugged. ‘I don’t have a wannabe wizard and a seer on my team, do I? That’s always helpful.’

‘I have a bigger crew, you know. Let’s wait for them. More help, you see.’

Her face darkened. ‘The offer stands for you two *only*. I don’t want more of your party to scare off my soldiers. They aren’t as open-minded as I am. Don’t hold it against them, my boy. You know, I have lived long enough to realize that bigotry is man’s biggest folly.’

It was confirmed. Sinbad knew she was using them. But he was allowed to join the expedition to the temple, and that was good enough. Once there, he would go in, betraying Dr Fang’s command. Plus, she was a smart woman with a strong army, and it was always good to team up with these sorts when you’re in a sticky situation, he

thought. And when the threat of the cultists was eliminated, he'd get the tablet for his team.

'Fine,' he said, 'when do we start?'

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THIRTY

Sinbad woke up to cries and wails that came from the other end of the camp. While preparations to leave for the temple had been underway, Sinbad had eaten, drank a lot of hot water and slept.

Pressa was beside him now, panting ‘You’re awake, boy? Dr Fang found a scout who was spying on the camp. She’s having fun with him now, poking him with her blade,’ Pressa grinned as more wails came their way.

Sinbad shook his head. He never reveled in violence like this. He walked to the northern boundary of the camp, where the cultist, stark naked, had been tied to a large cross. Gashes, wounds and burn marks covered his body. He was wailing as more lashes rained down on him.

All the soldiers in the camp were clinking their ale-filled glasses and laughing at him.

‘Is everyone from your land a sadist?’ Sinbad asked Pressa, his voice dripping with disgust.

‘Says the one whose history is based on bloodshed,’ Pressa retorted. ‘And he deserved it. He’s a spy.’

Dr Fang turned to see Sinbad and laughed. She had a knife in her hand. ‘They’re hard to kill, boy. It’s a task, but I’m having fun.’

‘You brought him here, so his friends will follow.’

‘What would you have had me do?’

‘Move the camp,’ Sinbad said uneasily. He had started to feel very uncomfortable here.

‘We’re leaving anyway. Even the mules have been prepped.’ She stepped closer to Sinbad. ‘You seem to sympathize with these madmen. Do you know they are creatures of the night? They hunt for human flesh and worship a crazy god who could destroy the world. You should start worrying more about yourself and less about these faithless scum.’

Sinbad looked at her sharply. ‘And where did you get this intel from? About them hurting the innocent and bringing the world to an end?’

She stared back. ‘From sources called “none of your business”. They are planning to release this god . . . this monster. And we need to stop them.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘I was *told*. By these cultists.’

Sinbad shook his head. He wanted to ask the cultists himself, but he noticed that the bound man had died, a trickle of blood running from his mouth. A slow and painful death. Dr Fang looked at the body and grinned. Her eye patch shone. ‘Oh, well. Too bad.’ She thumped the knife across Sinbad’s chest. ‘Keep this. I’ll get it back from you soon. Wipe it for me, will you, boy?’ She glanced at Pressa. ‘Think about it,’ she said, sauntering off.

Sinbad stayed frozen for a minute.

‘You do not like her,’ said Pressa to Sinbad. ‘Why?’

‘Didn’t think she will be so self absorbed.’

‘Narcissitic people tend to be very strong,’ Pressa said matter of factly.

‘I believe you have gotten that opposite. They are the worst.’ He was still staring into the distance. ‘And what did she mean when she said think about it?’

Pressa ignored him and began to walk.

Sinbad followed. ‘Come on, tell me.’

‘Asked me to join her.’

‘What do you mean join her?’

‘Like be part of her crew. She requires a seer. So she asked me if I was interested in the job. It’s that simple.’

‘Don’t even think about it.’ He snapped.

‘And why is that, Sinbad?’ She turned to face him. Do you own me?’

Sinbad was silent.

‘Didn’t think so. I have to make a choice, and right now, I feel like it’s better to be with her,’ she said hotly. ‘Around people like me. My mother would be happy. I could even meet a nice Chinese boy in the future. Or better, become a great explorer like her, be part of adventures. Can you imagine how wonderful that would be?’

‘But . . . but she’s using you. She just wants a seer, so she’ll just use you—’

‘And aren’t you? Just because she directly said it, she’s wrong? You *also* want the same things.’

‘I know, but we’re the good guys.’ Sinbad sighed.

‘And *who* has branded you that way? What makes her bad? She’s a bold woman and because of that—you are afraid. You cannot stand bold women, captain. I think I’m quite confident in my decision.’

‘No, it’s nothing like that. I don’t use . . .’

But she had already marched ahead.

Sinbad's head hurt. He started to feel caged and helpless. Could it be true—that he was afraid of a woman leader? He's replaced Idris too, become the captain when she was more than capable. And now this Dr Fang, who he just didn't like. His master, Reis, had killed too, but he never looked at him that way, until very late.

No! No! Stop thinking! He forced his thoughts. *Don't let it get into your head. Dr Fang is different; she killed innocents and is using us. It's her personality not her gender that is the problem.*

Sinbad slowly trudged forward, Pressa's words ringing in his ears. He finally caught up to her at the edge of the camp. She seemed to be staring straight ahead, her arms by her sides and her back to him. She seemed to be unusually calm for a person who had just had an argument with something.

'I'm sorry, Pressa. I'm just afraid of losing you all. Talk to me, please.' He gently shook her by the shoulder. Pressa turned. Her face . . .

Covering her whole face was a small, squid-like creature. Its tentacles engulfing her whole small face.

'What the—'

Sinbad staggered back. He looked wildly around him and saw similar creatures attached to the faces of the Chinese soldiers. They were dropping to the icy ground like flies, unconscious. They were falling on the snow like they were dozing off, in an eerie sleep. He scampered to the other direction and spotted Dr Fang scrambling on all fours to escape the squid that was moving towards her, just about to lunge when—Sinbad threw Dr Fang's knife at the squid. It slashed open.

'Thank you,' Dr Fang panted.

‘What the heavens are these things?’ Sinbad yelled as he made his way to her.

‘Whatever they are, they’re disgusting,’ she said, catching her breath. ‘One of the cultists I interrogated had said . . . that the Old One would produce these squid-like things from its skin whenever it was disturbed . . . whenever it shifted.’

‘I believe the scout you killed happened to die for the right reasons.’

‘What do you mean?’ she said sternly.

‘He led his team here! With these strange creatures. And they’re forcing everyone to sleep. We need to escape. Now.’

‘You don’t have to tell me that, boy.’ She stood and began making her way out of the camp.

Sinbad spotted Pressa, and grabbed hold of her. He pulled out his knife to scrape the squid from her face. Sinbad backed off a little; it was horrifying. The squid’s circular suction cups were embedded deep into her skin. It was attached to her in such a way that if he would plunge the blade more, it would tear her skin apart, maybe even kill her. Sinbad hoisted Pressa up onto his back and carried her as he followed Dr Fang.

Suddenly, a squid hopped across the snow and latched on to Dr Fang’s arm.

‘Look out!’ screamed Dr Fang as she saw another squid coming their way. It jumped on Sinbad before he could attack. They were appearing out of nowhere, in large numbers.

Sinbad and Pressa crashed to the ground. He tried to push away the slimy creature, but it rapidly moved up. He scurried on the hard icy floor, screaming his lungs out. They seem to be all over the ground, inching closer and closer. Sinbad thrashed his arms around, throwing a few off, but the one attached to him crawled closer to his arm . . . to his

face. Sinbad squirmed but it had got hold. It closed in on Sinbad’s mouth, sucking the air from his lungs. His eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he drifted out of consciousness.

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THIRTY-ONE

Sinbad was only half awake when he was thrown into the cell.

When he did fully wake, he had a pounding headache. The floor under him felt cold, hard and damp. His eyes were tired. He tried opening them at a stretch, but it was all blurry. He leaned back against the wall and saw Pressa across from him, muttering under her breath.

Whatever those freaky squid creatures were, they had sucked the energy out of them. But they hadn't killed. Sinbad felt weak. He strained his eyes; the prison bars were covered in thick ice and out ahead was a long galley with multiple lanes branching out of it. He was in a place where he didn't want to be. No one in their right mind would.

'Are you okay?' he asked her weakly.

'I feel disgusted. Does that sound okay?'

'Yeah, sounds just like you.'

'What happened to us?' she said, now softer.

'Their soul-sucking creatures attacked us, that's what happened.'

‘Have you read about them in any of your myths or legends?’

He chuckled. ‘You were right about one thing. Whatever this Old One is, he’s not from this world. This culture.’

Pressa stayed quiet.

‘I believe we need to escape.’ He tried to smile.

Pressa rose to her feet. ‘You don’t say! Tell me. They didn’t kill us. Why?’

‘Probably they want something from us. But then, we have nothing to offer. The one good thing is we seem to be in their lair. That means the tablet is here and we can get our hands on it.’

She nodded.

The pair began to plot their escape, checking the edges and corners of the cell. They yelled and screamed, but their voices just echoed. Beyond the cell’s bars was a long, icy passageway, completely empty.

‘There is no one here,’ Pressa said. ‘This place is . . . dead.’

‘Let’s not give up now.’ Sinbad inspected the bars more closely. ‘How can there be so much ice . . . Wait!’ He stopped in his tracks. ‘They’re made of ice!’

If he had something to melt them with, that would have been great help in this tricky spot.

‘Also, I heard what you said,’ said Pressa. She was now lying on the floor, exhausted.

‘What?’

‘That you’re afraid of losing us all.’

Sinbad clenched his jaw. ‘Yeah, well. That was stupid . . . I know everyone leaves.’

‘They do. In a way. That’s adult life.’ She pursed her lips. ‘But the ones who love you don’t. They stay in your heart.

Listen, I was just messing with you. I'm not leaving because I don't like you. It's because I'll learn a lot from her.'

Sinbad couldn't help but smile. 'I understand. I think I'm just a little insecure. I finally found belongingness and now it's being taken away.'

'Just because someone's not there in front of you, doesn't mean they're not *there*-there.'

Before he could respond, Sinbad noticed a cultist approaching them, walking down the corridor. Two more walked behind him. They unlocked the cell and directed Sinbad and Pressa to come with them, poking their spears into their backs.

'They seem to be pissed,' Sinbad said.

'Very much so.'

Up close, Sinbad noticed they reeked of blood, guts and decaying flesh. One of the guards in a deep purple hood, Sinbad now spotted, was carrying his sky-iron sword. His blood boiled at the thought of someone else handling his weapon.

They continued to walk on the snow-covered floor. Sinbad began to realize they were in a cave, in an underground one at that. It just *felt* like it.

The passageway opened to a large clearing that had a circular stone pedestal in the centre, and several more lanes leading out of it, in front of a massive, horrifying ice sculpture—a beast that was part squid, part dragon, part spider. The statue looked at least fifty feet in height, if not more, and was almost touching the ceiling. Everything about it was terrifying. It had a hundred eyes, tentacles, fangs and large ears.

Is this a replica or maybe even a remnant of the Old One? Is this what they worship?

Sinbad’s eyes fell on the stone pedestal. Right in the middle of it all. There lay the tablet. Multiple pathways seemed to be connected to the pedestal, stretching all the way to the dark corners of the cave. His thoughts began to race. How could he steal the tablet and run?

His thoughts were washed away when he saw Dr Fang kneeling in front of the statue, bloody and bruised. She seemed to have been there all along, but Sinbad didn’t notice her for next to the monstrous statue everything paled.

Sinbad and Pressa were pushed and made to kneel next to her. Almost a dozen cultists surrounded them. They began humming and beating their chests. Yelling and hooting.

‘What are they doing?’ Sinbad whispered to Fang.

‘Don’t even ask.’ She spat out blood. ‘Just don’t listen to them. They are raving lunatics, and you need to be—’

‘You know, it’s easy to yell but difficult to whisper,’ said the cultist in the middle. ‘Yes, I know your language, scum. All of yours. And I do not mind that you keep whispering like birds. But you come to our home, you encroach on our property, and you shall pay for the sins you have committed.’

Sinbad’s eyes widened. ‘I apologize. We didn’t know you were here.’

‘None do. You have killed us, maimed us, tortured us. For that, you will die,’ he spat. ‘We worship the Old One, and in his eyes, there’s no room for forgiveness for the likes of you.’

‘We had no intention of hurting you. We thought you were here to kill us . . .’ Sinbad trailed off. He was feeling angry at Dr Fang. It was because of her and her mindless killing that they were in this position.

‘Oh, really?’ said the cultist angrily. ‘We know that your friend, the doctor, is not here for noble reasons. She has been interrogating our people to learn about the Old One and his location, so she could bring him to life and then tame him like a beast, like a dog. Our god can never be treated like that.’

‘What!’ Sinbad and Pressa looked at Fang.

She just shrugged. ‘Okay, so I lied. The Tang dynasty wants to tame the beast, and they paid me a lot of money to find a way to do so. I was part of the first research party sent here to collect intel before the rest of squad joins in.’

Sinbad felt his anger rising. His intuition was right; there was something off about Fang and that they were betrayed. Sinbad saw the hurt in Pressa’s eyes.

‘He’s not a beast, woman. He’s our god,’ said the cultist, angrily. ‘We were exiled to this island—outcasts, all stranded! His presence warmed us in this harsh climate. He made us feel that he was here for us. He sheltered us. Gave us a home.’ The man looked at the statue, and they all began to hum again.

‘That’s a dragon, dumbass,’ Sinbad growled. In return, he was punched in the stomach by the man.

‘We call him the Leviathan,’ the cultist whispered. ‘Born at a time when there was nothing but nature. Before civilization. Centuries ago, at the beginning of time, he roamed freely until other species began to emerge and the cycle of killing and violence started. The Leviathan, the Old One, sought peace, but was bitten by parasites that sucked out his soul and drove him mad. The old divine being just wanted to live in peace, but there was no escaping. So he receded to the regions of utmost cold, before the comets smashed the earth and destroyed most of the world. The parasites weakened him, and he slept. But he came to us in

our dreams with a message that he wants to stay asleep. What started as his damnation became his salvation—this part of the unwanted world.'

He paused and turned his gaze from the sculpture to Sinbad. 'You know, we listened to him in our dreams . . . his mutterings.' The man whispered as if it to talk about this was blasphemous. 'We eventually realized that if he were to wake, he would destroy the world.' The man shuddered a little. 'Here he liked the peace that he never got. We found the tablet beside his sleeping body.' He paused. 'Since he gave us a home . . . gave us everything, we are in forever debt to the Old One. Our duty is to let him sleep peacefully, and that's where you lot come in—trespassers—whom the Leviathan hates. And now, we shall conduct our final parting prayers for you all.'

That didn't sound right.

Sinbad now noticed the rodent-like bloodsuckers on the statue. He couldn't believe such a large creature could be tamed by such small critters.

'The parasites were on the gills, weren't they?' Fang asked. 'Your statue has it, that's why.'

The man didn't answer.

Fang now turned to Pressa and Sinbad. 'Listen you two, now is the time we banded together, if you want to live,' whispered Fang. 'I require Pressa's help to distract the Leviathan when he wakes. A powerful creature like him can be receptive to telepathy from what these loons have described. What we need now is someone to get into his head, that is Pressa . . . while I figure out an escape route.'

'No, there's no mind control happening here,' Sinbad snapped. 'You heard what they just said. The ones who *literally* worship him are scared to release him. That tells us who we are dealing with.'

Fang shrugged.

‘Hey, dummy!’ Sinbad called out to the cultist. ‘The tablet you think of as some holy book is actually a missing piece of the wonderstone, and it has no religious significance. Just because something *looks* ancient and mysterious, doesn’t make it religious. Got that? Now that that’s clear, I want it and you can go on with all these chants and prayers.’

The cultist chuckled. ‘We are sacrificing *you* to him, for he tells us to. So you aren’t going anywhere.’

‘He’s frozen, you fools,’ Pressa called out, pointing at the statue. ‘How do you think he’s going to eat us?’

The man who had spoken to them stepped closer. He let out a laugh. ‘That’s just a statue, my dear. That’s not our great Leviathan.’

Fang and Pressa looked confused.

‘Then where is he?’ Sinbad asked, a little nervous.

‘The island you are on . . . that’s *him*.’

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THIRTY-TWO

Sinbad stared at the floor. He couldn't help it.

Even Pressa did.

That's the Leviathan.

A lump began to form in his throat as he recalled how big the archipelago had looked when he first saw it.

It had been Leviathan's back.

Sinbad began to squirm, shifting on the floor's surface. How big was this creature? The islands went on and on. And then the mystery of how such a big creature succumbed to parasites. There was a kind of an irony in this.

'Now you shall die by the flames of Leviathan,' the man said. 'For trespassers, there's no mercy.'

'You didn't get the upper hand,' Fang said.

Ignoring her, the cultist pulled out a spear with an oiled cloth attached to its end. He lit it by the flame of a burning lamp nearby.

Fang chuckled. 'You thought I let you attack us by interrogating your filthy friend for hours. No. I led *you* to us.' She let out a maniacal laugh.

‘What are you doing? Shut up,’ Sinbad hissed. He thought he felt the ground quiver beneath him. A faint murmur seemed to be growing closer.

Fang shrugged. ‘You fool, I *wanted* to see the lair, but I couldn’t find it. It was taking forever to find. Who wants to be stranded here in, in this bloody ice land forever? So I thought, hey, let them come to us. You see, I *know* you don’t eat trespassers. I found out by questioning your man. You sacrifice them. So I just had to wait for you to attack us. The camp was bait. I put up the show and your friend was . . . well, just unlucky. You brought us in yourself.’ She grinned.

The moment she finished talking, the sound grew louder. Suddenly, Fang’s soldiers filled the passageways. The cultists wailed and cried as they were attacked, thrown from the lanes they were standing in. The pedestal soon become a battle ground as the cultists began to fight Fang’s army, who had come out of nowhere.

Fang grabbed hold of the flaming spear and plunged it deep into the heart of the cultist who carried it. She laughed loudly.

Sinbad shakily stood up. Gaining his balance, he lurched at the guard next to him, who has stolen his sword, and grabbed hold of it, while Pressa bit the arm of the cultist who was holding her.

The ice roof started to rain. A chilly wind whipped around them. Sinbad kept his eyes on the prize, the stone. As the swords clanged around him, Sinbad focused on the bullseye —the stone. He began to bound towards the pedestal, when another cultist appeared before him. He kicked and punched the man, who fell with a thud. Another guard ran up to them, carrying a spear. But before he could do anything, he crumpled to the floor. Pressa emerged from behind him; she

had grabbed the stone and smacked it across the cultist's head.

'We should go,' Sinbad said, looking gratefully at Pressa.

'You can run. But you aren't going anywhere,' Fang shouted as she kicked down a cultist and grabbed his double-edged spear. She snapped it with ease and held the two halves like twin swords. 'I need Pressa to be with *me*. It's rare to have someone like her.'

Sinbad looked at Pressa.

'Come with me, little girl. This is a doomed mission, and you *know* it. I'm sure you've already seen it. They won't be able to wake the Leviathan. He's the bloody whole island. Imagine how tough it would be to fight him, if they do manage to wake him.'

'You speak for yourself,' Pressa said angrily. 'Not for me.'

'But I'm Dr Fang. The most intrepid of adventurers.'

'And I am Sinbad the Sailor.' Sinbad rolled his eyes.

'Can you both stop saying your names as if that's supposed to mean something?' Pressa cried out. 'This is not convincing anyone.'

'You know one thing, Fang. She can go with you if *she* wants to. We might not go on the coolest of adventures, like you, but I sure as hell would never lie to you.'

Pressa clenched her jaw.

'Oh, come on, don't be a baby, Pressa,' Fang yelled in exasperation. 'He's just using emotional blackmail. I lied because you were strangers. It's only logical.'

'If the Tang dynasty got access to Leviathan, they would be able to rule the world, wouldn't they?' Pressa asked.

Fang smiled. 'And don't you want that? For our people to rule? To be the first in this race. We will be heroes. We will be the strongest army in the whole world.'

There was a silence between them.

Pressa stared at her. ‘My mother always used to tell me,’ she finally said, ‘that heroes don’t strive for strength through fear. They strive for strength through love.’

‘Well. Then you’re an idiot. Grab her!’ Fang growled at her men. But before any of the soldiers could act, Sinbad grabbed hold of Pressa’s hand and ran down one of the lanes. By now there were explosions in the background, and everything seemed to be falling apart. The two ran, making a way for the exit as Fang and her men followed them.

Which has to be somewhere here, thought Sinbad.

‘Do you know where you’re going?’ Pressa asked.

‘I have no idea. We will find it along the way.’

They jumped across lanes and now were running on a rather darker path, a less smoother one. Suddenly, Sinbad halted for a second. ‘Wait . . . something is not right.’ His intuition told him something was off about this shadowy pathway. He gingerly took one more step and just then an arrow whizzed past him, vertically, from below.

‘Great! Booby traps. We’re going the right way. The exit must be near then,’ Sinbad said. ‘Walk carefully.’

Sinbad and Pressa inched forward cautiously.

‘Come on, come on . . .’ Sinbad noticed the floor in front of him seemed to be made of dry ice. ‘Jump over it. This is fake.’ They were almost at the exit when Fang and her two soldiers caught up to them.

‘Catch them! I want her. Kill him.’

The men rushed towards Sinbad and Pressa but arrows and spikes flew from the wall, plunging through the soldiers, shattering their bodies. They died on spot.

Fang was shocked, but she gingerly stepped forward, closer to Sinbad and Pressa.

‘I think we should leave. Let’s run, boy. What are you waiting for?’ Pressa urged.

‘I have to let the secret of Leviathan die here,’ Sinbad said.

‘Are you going to fight her? She’s immortal for heaven’s sake!’ Pressa yelled at him, incredulously.

Sinbad pulled out his sky-iron sword. ‘This ends here, doctor. You and me. Let’s go.’

Fang chuckled. She had managed to walk the path without activating any of the traps. ‘Little kid, I have hundreds of years of swordsmanship training under my belt.’ She clanged the twin swords against each other. ‘What do you have?’ She lurched ahead, not noticing the bed of dry ice that Sinbad had just stepped on. She toppled down into a pit of a hundred sharp thorns. She cried out in surprise, shocked that she was outwitted by two children.

Sinbad looked down. For a moment, he almost pitied her, hearing her wails and curses. Plus, the Caliph would not be pleased that an emissary, an immortal world-famous adventurer at that, was left to eventually perish.

‘I might not have a lot of things. But I always make sure I have the upper hand,’ he said to her.

They turned away while she wailed, moving to the exit. They stepped out onto the frozen back of the Leviathan. The tablet in Sinbad’s hand.

‘Sorry, buddy.’ He patted the ground. ‘You continue to sleep. No one will come to wake you up. And sorry for all the trouble.’

‘Should we leave, or do you want to keep feeling good about yourself?’ Pressa asked, rolling her eyes.

Sinbad laughed. ‘Just give me a few more moments, please.’

Pressa chuckled as Sinbad rounded his arms around her shoulder.

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THIRTY-THREE

Sinbad had reached the ship and he was exhausted. He knew they should quickly leave and so he blared the horns for everyone to come back. He knew they had to leave quickly if they wanted to avoid the angry Chinese army.

When the team was back, red-cheeked and freezing cold, he immediately ordered his crew to set sail.

‘Show us,’ Idris said.

Sinbad had been covering the tablet with a blanket. He was almost too afraid to let it go, but when Idris came forward with a grin, he showed it to her.

‘We encountered some of the most monstrous fish we’d ever seen,’ Ashrafiyah said, rolling her eyes. ‘You got the tablet while we did the hard work.’

‘Well, we had our share of troubles too,’ Pressa remarked.

‘Like?’

‘The island is not an island. Let’s just leave it at that.’

They all looked at her and Sinbad quizzically, but Sinbad just grinned. ‘Let’s just leave it at that! Let’s now make a run for it, shall we? Ahoy!’

Sinbad was about to take the tablet back, when he noticed something on the waters. A flicker of a large apparition.

I have seen this somewhere . . .

A ship. An old one, one made of skulls and bones.

‘Sakhr,’ he said.

‘You’ve got to be kidding me,’ said Husayn. ‘How did he get to know this time?’

‘Woah!’ Ashrafiyah exclaimed, joining them. ‘Love the way he just stalks people.’

‘I think he’s tracking us,’ said Idris. ‘Following us. Letting us do the dirty work. So while we do all the hard work—’

‘And he takes the cake,’ Sinbad added glumly.

‘Cherry. It’s not take the cake. It’s take the cherry.’ Idris responded.

‘What? No, it isn’t. And is this the time to discuss this?’ Sinbad snapped at her.

‘I was lightening the mood. What do you think we should do?’ she asked.

‘We can’t let him take the tablet again. He already has the other one.’

Sakhr’s ship was moving closer.

‘So do you want to fight for it?’ Husayn meekly asked.

‘They have the Nephilim and Draugrs on board. I believe we won’t stand a chance.’ Sinbad said. ‘And the red-haired whacko too, who has some strange witchcraft and some kind of magic attached to her.’ He mulled, as they all looked at him for some sort of captainship. Sinbad felt pressured and hated these scenarios when he didn’t have an answer or a clear order for the rest of his crew. They all looked at him expectantly. ‘Okay, let’s charge at them.’

‘What?’ Markus asked.

‘Yeah, we don’t stand a chance, my love,’ Ashrafiyah said.

Sinbad looked at Safeena, who had been quiet all this time.

‘We shall see. Just do what I say.’

‘What are you trying to do?’ Idris demanded.

‘Mischief.’

Sinbad jumped onto the hull and grabbed the nearest rope that was connected to the masts. ‘Prepare the Greek fires. The explosives need to destroy everything they have! Get the arrows ready.’

The ship moved rapidly while the catapults were readied.

Through his spyglass, Sinbad saw that Sakhr was surprised. Charging like this at a ship twice the size of their own was surely stupid. Especially in these waters that was half ice, with very little open flowing waters. Maneuvering swiftly in these conditions would mean crashing the ship into ice chunks and dying a painful, freezing death.

By Fate and Fortune, inched closer to the ship made of skulls and bones. There was now very little distance between the two.

‘When the arrows fly overhead, shield yourselves,’ Sinbad barked.

The Greek fires rained down on the other ship, but even now it moved towards By Fate and Fortune, trying to attack it with its hull. It was getting charred and damaged but apparently the Admiral didn’t care; the ancient ship was sailing towards them, head on. Sakhr’s ship was now inches apart, but it didn’t halt. It kept moving closer, thrusting and crashing towards Sinbad’s vessel.

And that’s what Sinbad had wanted.

Because the moment that happened, Sinbad shouted to Ashrafiyah: ‘Levitate it!’

‘What?’

‘Levitate the bloody ship!’

Ashrafiyah began to cast a spell, raising them from the water. By Fate and Fortune lurched into the air and began to rush towards the sky. Sakhr's ship crashed into an iceberg, jamming into the ice blocks.

Sinbad grinned. 'Bet he didn't anticipate this,' he said to Idris who was next to him on the deck. 'That I would run away. I wanted to confuse and anger him with the attack. Charging at us was a stupid mistake. Now they are stuck, and we are on our way!'

Idris raised her brows. 'Impressive.'

Sinbad looked down through his spyglass at the ship, which had been stopped in its tracks. Sakhr looked back at him, smiling. A chill ran down his spine; he was expecting an angry demon and not a smiling, calm one.

For some reason, Sinbad felt that Sakhr *wanted* him to win this round.

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THIRTY-FOUR

Sinbad sat in the mess, chomping down on anything he could get his hands on. Good adventures made him hungry. The rest of the crew ate in silence.

Idris spoke after finishing her chicken broth. ‘We narrowly missed Sakhr but he continues to remain a threat. What do you think we should do about him?’

‘I don’t know. I think I’m just indifferent,’ he said, slurping the soup.

‘Why is that?’ Safeena chimed in.

‘The goal is to get the wonderstone, not to defeat Sakhr,’ Sinbad said between mouthfuls of food. ‘Can we trust him? Now that’s a different question. I think we should just aim to get the stones to the caliph, who has been a generous benefactor.’

There was a minute of silence.

‘I say we kill Sakhr. And we end this madness of Iblis,’ Safeena said through gritted teeth. ‘He still plagues my dreams . . . my father. He’s got something evil brewing and Sakhr is a big part of it, I can feel it.’

And the way she said it, made everyone shiver.

Sinbad nodded. ‘Sure. Let’s target the third wonderstone then first.’

‘And where was that again, sweetheart?’ asked Ashrafiyah, biting into a strawberry dipped in chocolate.

‘Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire,’ said Idris.

‘Once we get that one, we can plan to get hold of the stone Sakhr has,’ Sinbad said. ‘I was reading up about the Byzantines. They’re currently ruled by Constantine the Sixth.’

‘He’s a child, that’s what he is,’ Markus blurted out. ‘But illogical and doesn’t have a sense of humour. I was once a mercenary there, and his rule is absolutely unjust. Do not like him. Like the rest.’

‘Who are the rest?’

‘There are people who oppose him and his rule, thinking he’s unfit. But he comes from old money. A lot of his own generals have contested against him. If he doesn’t have the support of his own army, he hires armies from different countries. A petulant, spoilt brat controlled by his overzealous mother.’

Deadpan, Idris said, ‘I think we’re in for a ride. Wee-hee.’

Sinbad was glad he had the caliph’s scroll with him, allowing him to roam around the capital. The Arabs and the Byzantines had a cordial relationship. Not great, but enough not to kill each other at first sight. And Constantine the Sixth was all about making amends, just like Harun al-Rashid.

‘We drop down to the Marmara Sea,’ Markus explained, ‘and dock ourselves at the harbour of Theodosius. I’ll instruct my men.’

They got up to leave—all but Husayn, remained at the table with Sinbad.

‘I think we’re facing an issue in our communication,’ he said.

‘And what is that?’ Sinbad asked, irritated.

‘That we are not communicating. So what is it? What’s going on? Are you having second thoughts about all of this? Am I boring to you now? What is it?’

Sinbad sighed. He didn’t want to have this conversation. ‘It’s nothing. Everything is all right. I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘We’ve been friends for years now. I know when something is wrong between us.’

‘Are you hiding anything from me?’ Sinbad asked after a pause.

Husayn blinked in surprise. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Ah, I see.’

‘You’ve been like this ever since you returned from the Admiral’s ship. I have a feeling he’s brainwashed you or something.’

Sinbad stood. ‘Husayn, my friend, I am fine. You can calm down.’

‘You avoided me in our last adventure too,’ saying this, Husayn got up as well.

‘Then perhaps in this one you can accompany me.’ Sinbad regretted it as soon as he spoke. He didn’t want to spend time with Husayn. It would lead to further confrontation. But Husayn smiled, unaware.

Sinbad walked to the ship’s lower deck, leaving the mess and Husayn behind, when he saw Safeena in the corner, hidden in darkness.

‘You should just tell him the truth.’

‘What?’

‘You’re annoyed with him. It’s visible on your face.’

Sinbad wanted to say so much to her. Apologize for his behaviour. Tell her how he felt. Instead, he spat out, ‘I don’t think you remember how I used to be. I’m perfectly fine.’

‘One doesn’t change.’

‘You did,’ he snapped.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ What he meant slowly dawned on her. ‘I didn’t kill the man I love out of choice. *I* killed him because . . .’ She shrugged. ‘It shouldn’t matter to *you* what I did. What matters is, why are you ignoring Sakhr? You are someone who always proactively fights the enemy, and here you are running away. Why is that?’

Sinbad pursed his lips. ‘Because I usually understand the enemy. And here, I don’t know who he is, what he wants and, most of all, how he plans to do what he plans to do.’

‘All fiends like him have one thing in common—they think the world is as twisted as they are.’

She stormed away, leaving Sinbad in the dark.

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THIRTY-FIVE

In the mortal world, Sinbad had never seen a civilization as beautiful as Constantinople.

The capital that was built on ruins by Constantine, it was the one that defied Roman norms and brought in a new wave of Christianity, growing to be a powerful frontier. From high up in the sky, he could see the dome-shaped structures, tall towers and mosaics, so similar to the architecture in Baghdad.

‘I don’t like this,’ Sinbad grumbled as his bright red toga was draped by Ashrafiyah and Pressa. He felt naked. ‘It’s so . . . *open*.’

‘Oh, stop it. You look handsome, my love. Quite a charmer.’ Ashrafiyah grinned. ‘You know the rules. The king is a little idiotic about clothing here. Wants everyone to embrace the Byzantine style.’

Sinbad huffed. This was Markus’s idea. Even Husayn was being dressed up in a purple one.

‘I hope he’s not making a fool out of me,’ Sinbad sighed.

The ship began to float down to the sea, away from the harbour, so as to not alert the people of Constantinople of their magic.

The Arabs and the Romans had their fair share of problems; skirmishes along the borders, cold wars that eventually would lead to diplomatic dialogue. But they also shared decent relations from time to time. The Seids had helped the nation by saving its people from a Kraken once. They had put the creature into deep sleep. People had rejoiced and the then ruler, Constantine the Sixth, made peace with Baghdad. However, everyone knew that this was temporary.

Sinbad came on the out of the deck and he saw Husayn in a purple toga. He looked at his then, a striking red.

‘This is going to be fun,’ Husayn chirped.

Sinbad stepped onto the deck, followed by the others. Despite it being far, he could already see the city’s beauty.

‘You two need to be careful,’ Idris said. ‘The only reason we’re not all going is because the king will feel threatened if we do. So stay safe. Send word out, if you need us.’

Sinbad nodded. ‘Sure, Mom.’

Idris rolled her eyes.

They were almost at the shore. Ships, traders, merchants and coolies filled the tableau. People hurried along, buying wares in the bazaar or climbing up the zigzag roads, where soldiers stood guard. In all this bustle, it seemed that no one noticed By Fate and Fortune casually sliding in without any papers.

Husayn cursed. ‘Seeing all this activity, I don’t think the king will have the time for us.’

‘I have a feeling that won’t be an issue.’ Sinbad pointed at the string of soldiers wearing capes and bronze helmets waiting for them to exit. ‘They *know* a foreign ship.’

Sinbad began to walk down the plank with an air of confidence. He presented the caliph's scroll. The commander in the middle read the scroll and narrowed his gaze.

'You are a child,' he barked. 'You could have forged this.'

'It's his sigil. In his blood, no less. You can send a raven to double check if you want to.'

The commander nodded. 'Follow us.' He turned to a few of his men. 'And keep an eye on the ship, you lot. I do not want any of them to be out of your sight.'

Sinbad shrugged, indifferent to this behaviour. He had expected it. They began to walk through the city, passing people in brightly coloured togas. There were numerous high towers and snaking paths that were lit with lamps. The smell of bread, brass and the sea hung in the air.

'You are fortunate the king is free right now,' the commander said. 'And any friend of the caliph is a friend of ours . . . for now.'

Sinbad didn't like the threat but said nothing. They crossed churches, an acropolis and a hippodrome. The place reminded him of his adventure with the vampires of Oman. The world was different there, similar to here.

'That's what I like about this, you know,' Husayn said. 'Travelling lets you explore the nuances of the world.'

'And yet you want to stay put in Baghdad?'

'Who said I did?'

Sinbad bit his lip.

'What do you know?' Husayn asked suspiciously.

'I know you applied for a post at the Royal Guard.'

Husayn was silent. 'Ah,' he finally said, 'and who told you?'

'I have my sources.'

‘Sakhr.’ Husayn shook his head. ‘You can’t let him get in your head, man. He’s crazy.’

‘But you did, right?’

‘I did, and I had my reasons. And they had nothing to do with abandoning the bloody ship or, most of all, abandoning you.’

‘Then what were they?’

Husayn couldn’t say more as they were close to the royal palace. It shone like a jewel with its rainbow of colours, its pillars made of marble and its gardens full of tulips. The guards stationed there were twice as Sinbad’s size. Sinbad noticed a long line of people gathered there, probably waiting for an audience with the king. The palace looked impenetrable with its spiked barricades but also had delicate features, like the archways and numerous flower bouquets.

Sinbad and Husayn walked up the stairs, a cold silence hanging between them. They reached the pavilion, where a young boy in a white toga and a laurel wreath stood. The boy had a slimy build, light grey eyes and a sinister smile. Two burly guards stood behind him. More guards were lined up against the inner walls—way too many according to Sinbad.

‘Welcome. I was just leaving for a stroll, but here we are . . . the Arabs.’ The boy smiled wider.

The guards who had escorted Sinbad bowed to him. The commander said, ‘My lord, they just arrived. They wanted an audience with you.’ He showed the boy the scroll.

Constantine the Sixth, Sinbad noticed, was a fairly young ruler. He was crowned king at the age of eight by his conniving mother, Irene, who pulled the strings. But as Constantine grew, so did his hatred for his mother. He was tired of being powerless and being played and so, he had

stripped her of regency, becoming the sole ruler. He was cunning and capable of cruelty.

‘Harun! He isn’t that good a friend! Tell me, how can I let you enter like this? And especially when he is targeting our trade ships.’

Okay, so things are bad, thought Sinbad. ‘We’re not here for peace negotiations,’ he said.

‘Then what are you here for? Hurry, I need to go for my walks,’ the king ordered.

‘We know you hold the wond—I mean, an ancient tablet that is connected to the tomb of Alexander. We just want to take that and be on our way. No trouble.’

The king chuckled. ‘You mean the mystical tablet that is the *only* surviving ruin, my ancestor Constantine the First happened to bring here? The same one that was remotely connected to the great leader of Macedonia? You want me to just hand you that relic simply because you asked for it? Wow. I should do that. That is so simple. What do you think about that, Theos?’ He turned to a man with grey hair and a squat body who had just walked up to them.

Probably a minister, thought Sinbad.

‘I think I should do it,’ the king said. ‘Out of my way.’ He got up, ready to descend the stairs, his head held high.

Husayn whispered to Sinbad, ‘Are you thinking what I’m thinking?’

‘And what are you thinking?’

‘A heist. We need to perform a heist and steal it from him.’

‘What? Have you seen the level of security here? The fortress is impenetrable. Even magic cannot help when the army is this big,’ Sinbad said worriedly.

As his thoughts began to race, something unexpected happened. A large rock-like creature with a humanoid face appeared out of nowhere, close to the king. It was three

times the tallest guard, had beady eyes and seemed to be crudely made of clay, sand and human flesh and bones.

The king let out a high-pitched scream. ‘Not you again!’ He jumped back. ‘Attack! Attack!’

The guards began to shoot arrows at the creature, but it was undeterred. The arrows bounced off as if they were made of rubber. Two guards appeared with their swords and spears to attack the creature, but he just slapped them away with his hand.

Sinbad lunged forward, noticing the word written on the creature’s head: *emet*, which meant ‘truth’ in Hebrew.

The creature raised his arm to attack Sinbad, but he was ready with his sky-iron sword. He brought it down into the creature’s hand, but it just crumbled before re-forming instantly. Sinbad jumped onto the creature’s head, where he swiftly rubbed out the first letter of the word that was scribbled on its forehead. The moment he did, the creature stopped, as if it had been controlled by it, before bursting into a cloud of dust and sand.

‘Did you just . . . Did you just kill it? Did you just . . .’ The king looked at Sinbad in a new light. ‘Did you just . . . How did you do that? That thing has been plaguing me for so long!’

Sinbad flashed a smile and smoothed down his hair. ‘Knowledge is power. Knowing what kills it rather than using brute force is how I did it. He’s gone for now, but he’s a golem. He’ll return.’

The king’s face went pale. ‘No . . .’

‘The point is, Your Highness, what did you do that made someone angry enough to set a golem after you?’

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THIRTY-SIX

Sinbad was in the middle of the party.

Constantine had organized a celebration at the palace to thank Sinbad. The most important people of the city had gathered there, and they all talked, drank and ate. Platefuls of grilled mutton and chicken, lavish stews and fruits were placed before them. Sinbad and Husayn sat beside the boy king.

Sinbad had learnt that the golem had been troubling the city for quite a long time, and had repeatedly tried to attack the king. Each time, Constantine would flee to the palace, where the golem couldn’t enter.

The king and his people didn’t even know what kind of creature it was. They had sent numerous inquiries to guilds across the world but no answer was satisfactory. Constantine didn’t believe in using magic, seeing it as an instrument of oppression, but after Sinbad’s actions, the king realized he had to build a powerful guild in his own empire.

‘You know I had even taken to going to the Church. Crying to the bishop to save me. Now I don’t know if I was stupid or

I was just not smart enough.’ He chugged his mug of ale, his third one.

‘That’s kind of the same thing.’ Sinbad shrugged.

The king laughed and slapped Sinbad’s back. ‘Oh well, you are my friend now. I owe you my life.’

‘But your life continues to be in danger. That golem has died. There will be more.’

‘I do not want to be surrounded by cynics, but I should listen to you. What do you call this thing? Golem? Such a strange name.’

‘Yes. Have you recently angered a Jew?’

Constantine began to chuckle, but he wasn’t sure if Sinbad was joking or not. ‘I have angered a lot of people, but no Jews. How do golems work?’

‘They’re basically creatures with no brains. They are made of dead people.’

‘Ah, that’s why it looked familiar!’ He rose in fascination from his seat. ‘He reminded me of that cook whose eyes I gouged out because he served me cold stew.’

Sinbad widened his eyes in bewilderment. He almost didn’t want to save the boy. ‘Um, yes. So golems are made of the bones and tattered flesh of dead people you have offended, mixed with some clay, sand and magical spells. It all comes together to create this undefeatable monster. No weapon can hurt them. No magic can tame them. They were created because the rabbis feared for their lives and needed protection.’

‘Everything can be defeated. You managed with that one,’ the king pointed out.

‘Yes, but not exactly. They only truly disappear when you find out who cursed you. Someone wants you dead, and they have used golems to do that.’

‘And what were those symbols on it?’

‘That’s a *shem*—sacred Hebrew words. I removed the *aleph* from the emet. This led to it reading ‘dead’. So it died. It’ll do whatever is written on its head. It was searching for the truth earlier. What is that truth? We don’t know.’

‘Truth?’ Constantine rolled his eyes. ‘That’s weird. I am an honest and open person.’

‘Yeah, you seem . . . grand.’

He narrowed his eyes, trying to figure if Sinbad was being sarcastic.

“‘How do you find this person who wants to kill you or search for the truth or whatever?’

‘You can’t. They hide in plain sight. But usually, when the golem is unable to to fulfil its mission, it goes back to the one who holds the spell over it. So I believe we can—’

‘Don’t tell me you need me to go outside again!’

‘If you want to know who’s planning to assassinate you . . .’

‘We know who it is,’ Theos, who had been eavesdropping, intervened. ‘It’s General Alexios. He has stationed an army on the outskirts and is waging a war against our king. He disapproves of the king because of, well, the poor public opinion that the king has here,’ he said, shiftily looking at the tipsy Constantine. He came close and whispered to Sinbad, ‘Not many like him, you see. He’s projected as an evildoer.’

‘And he was my general! He just left one day,’ shouted Constantine belligerently, clearly drunk.

‘Why did the general leave?’ Husayn asked.

‘I married his wife and locked her up. But I really don’t see why he should be this angry. It’s nothing personal.’ The king shrugged.

Sinbad shared a look with Husayn. They both couldn’t believe how such a an elite person, a ruler no less, was so

indifferent to the actual lives of his people.

‘So if Alexios is the one who did it, is he searching for something? The truth?’

‘Yes, probably where I hid his wife.’ Constantine looked glum. ‘Oh dear, how should I tell him now? I’ve killed her too.’

‘What’s your problem? Why do you keep killing everyone?’ Sinbad snapped.

Constantine shrugged. ‘I want you to save me, Arab magician.’

‘I’m not a magician. I’m a Seid.’

‘You can be a seed, I don’t mind, though it’s odd to call yourself that. Do you sprout up into something? Anyho, save me and I shall give you what you require.’

Sinbad looked up.

‘What was that again?’

Constantine got up and told them to follow. Sinbad and Husayn did so, accompanied by Theos and a few guards behind, as the sound of drums and trumpets were left behind. They began to move through the corridors of the palace, climbing down staircases that were lit by torches. They entered a damp dungeon, lit only by moonlight.

‘I should not be coming here drunk. It desecrates the place,’ Constantine said, pointing to the wonderstone. Unlike the other two, this one was polished and lustrous.

‘You can have this. I don’t want it.’

‘Your Highness,’ Theos said hurriedly, ‘this is our history and culture.’

‘And I shall piss on it. I care more about my life than any . . .’

The king started lifting up his tunic, when Sinbad said, ‘You know, you don’t have to prove a point. I’ll help you and you must give me your word that you’ll give this to me. I’ll

find the person who’s trying to kill you. But just remember one thing, it could be anyone.’

Constantine was snoring. He had fallen to the ground and was asleep like a child. Sinbad glanced at Husayn and Theos, who were looking at the king with disappointment.

‘This is going to be a challenge,’ Sinbad said. ‘And not for the reasons I thought it would be. At times, it’s the humans who are more troubling than the creatures.’

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THIRTY-SEVEN

Sinbad knew this plan could go horribly wrong. But he still chose to go through with it.

‘Are you sure this is going to work?’ Constantine asked nervously.

He was draped in civilian clothes and his face was hidden under a short hood. No one would recognize him as the king. They were in an open area, empty at night, which meant less or no casualties.

‘I should have brought my guards,’ he said.

‘And killed more of your men,’ Sinbad retorted. ‘No. The golem won’t stop till it gets you.’

‘So you will just hand me over? That’s not fair.’

‘It doesn’t want to kill you, Your Majesty. It wants to interrogate you. Truth, remember? So the worst that can happen is a couple of broken bones.’

‘That’s not reassuring at all!’ Constantine scowled.

Sinbad saw something above them, jumping from building to building.

‘Just go with the plan. You will have barely a few moments to make a run for it while I stop the golem and then

disappear. If you don’t do that, you’ll be caught by it.’

‘I know, I know. Will you be able to hold it back?’ he asked roughly.

‘I have a few tricks up my sleeve.’ He looked at Husayn and the two buckets of water he was carrying. ‘And the moment it sees you have left, I shall follow it to its master.’

They heard a thud above them.

‘It’s close. It can sense your presence,’ Sinbad noted, looking up.

‘How? I don’t even look like myself.’

‘The golem has your hair or some part of you with which it’s able to identify that it’s you. That’s how the curse is placed. They need to have something that belongs to you,’ Sinbad explained.

‘If you let me die, I shall get you killed, you know!’ the king exclaimed.

‘If you’re dead, you won’t be able to order your guards to kill me.’

Constantine went quiet when faced with that logic. He grumbled, ‘I’m a horrible boy. I’m a nuisance to my mother too.’

‘Whom you also locked up . . .’

‘Not really locked up. Just fired. She was too indulgent in office affairs, and I was a puppet king. I wanted to be more. I told her that her presence was making me grouchy.’

‘Yeah, how’s that working for you?’ Sinbad rolled his eyes.

The king didn’t get the sarcasm. ‘She’s angry with me, of course. She thinks I’m being an idiot, pushing her away, and that I will pay for it.’

Husayn added, ‘Your Highness, I remember having the same kind of conversation with my father. He wanted me to be a soldier, be part of his life, but I was too much of a brat

to be one. And then, well, he died a hero. If I had allowed him in my life, things would be different now.’

Sinbad hadn’t seen this side of Husayn earlier.

‘Well, your father sounds lovely. Mine is a witch who wants nothing but the throne. I am surrounded by all sorts of stupid people. Even Theos. I think he wants the throne too. He looks at me as if I’m a stupid child. I doubt everyone. But most of all, I doubt that general. I need him dead, and I shall reverse engineer the bloody golem and send it back to him.’

Sinbad sighed. ‘That’s not how it works.’

Constantine glared at Sinbad. ‘I think you like to frighten me. You know, I could have just ordered every rabbi in the city to be massacred.’ ‘Kill innocents? Listen, if you want me to help you, it’ll be on my terms,’ Sinbad answered angrily.

They all fell silent when they felt the road beneath them quake. The golem had jumped from the building and onto the ground. The hulking beast, with its misshapen body, began to walk towards them. Its eyes glowered. It looked menacing.

‘Okay, you know what to do,’ Sinbad shouted.

Constantine nodded as he reached for the smoke bombs. He threw them down.

Only they didn’t burst into smoky flames.

‘What the hell?’ Constantine yelled. ‘You said it would work!’

‘Those are *your* smoke bombs. Not mine.’

‘Oh, right!’

‘Run,’ Sinbad ordered. ‘Run as fast as possible.’

Constantine stumbled away.

‘Husayn! Go!’ Sinbad yelled.

Husayn threw the bucket of water on the golem. Its sandy armour began to melt away, the hands crumbling into dust.

The golem scowled at them as its hands began to re-form. Husayn threw the second bucket at it.

The two made a run for it. The golem was not perturbed by the attack. It jumped over them and moved towards the hippodrome.

‘Don’t tell me the stupid boy went to the arena,’ Sinbad growled.

‘Why would he do that?’ Husayn asked.

‘Because it’s closer. He can’t even run properly, that idiot.’

Sinbad and Husayn raced towards the closed area, which they noticed was already broken into by the golem—a few guards had been trampled in the process. Sinbad entered the theatre, which had a circular seating plan. In the centre, he saw the golem reaching out towards Constantine, who had knelt in fear, begging for redemption.

Sinbad lunged with his sky-iron sword and slashed one muddy arm, leading to the creature yelling in horror and surprise.

‘Husayn! Take him to the bloody palace.’

Husayn ran out of the area, hand in hand with the crying king, while Sinbad circled around the golem.

As it was about to strike, Sinbad rolled over and dove between its legs to attack it from behind. But the golem kicked him first, sending him flying through the stadium and onto the ground.

Sinbad stood up, choking, as he saw the golem was storming towards him, ready to swing. But Sinbad used all of his strength to somersault through the air and plunge his blade into the beast’s head.

The golem didn’t flinch.

It angrily looked around for Sinbad. It didn’t feel him sitting on top of its head. At one moment, the golem was

frenetic, but the next, it became extremely calm. As if its duty was suddenly over.

Sinbad deduced that the king must have entered his palace, so the golem knew it couldn't do anything.

He knew the golem would take him to its maker now. He clung on to its head as it leapt and bounded. He could feel the wind whipping through his hair.

The golem stopped at a house near the acropolis.

Sinbad pulled out his sword, toppling backwards off the creature's head, and saw a bearded old man coming out of the house, hissing:

> 'How many times have I told you to be quiet about it? You'll alarm the neighbours, and I'll have to answer.'

The man clapped, turning the golem into sand. Sinbad emerged riding the wave, brandishing his sword. He grabbed the old man by the throat, pinning him to the ground. The man's glasses and black hat rolled to the side.

'You better start explaining why I was jumping around the city on top of a brain-dead monster.'

'What?' The man whimpered at the sight of the sword. 'What? I don't know.'

Sinbad tightened his grip. 'Tell me! I literally saw you turn that thing to dust.'

'I was paid! I was paid.'

'By whom?'

'By the king himself,' he said. 'By Constantine the Sixth.'

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THIRTY-EIGHT

Sinbad knew what he had to do. But there was the nervous, unassuming gentleman by his side who was poking him as they entered the palatial royal court, where he had asked for an audience with King Constantine—the man who wanted to kill himself with the help of a golem.

‘Are you sure you want to do this? We can get our heads cut off,’ Husayn said.

‘It’s all right,’ Sinbad said reassuringly.

‘Which part is all right? When we get our heads cut off? Or when you’ll make everything go away?’ Husayn hissed.

‘You know how people say there’s never a way?’

‘Yeah?’

Sinbad stopped and looked at him. ‘There’s always a way. People just give up.’

Husayn grinned.

‘I’m sorry, Husayn,’ Sinbad blurted out.

‘About what?’

‘About being a child. I should have known that you wanted to continue your father’s legacy. And here I was, thinking

you were leaving because you wanted to move on . . . from me.’

Husayn smiled warmly. ‘I want to do a lot of things, Sinbad. But my father also said, ‘Never leave your partner alone in peril. Always be there, no matter what.’

Sinbad smiled back as they both embraced. ‘I was just insecure, you know. I don’t want to let this small family of mine go away.’

‘Families never go away, my friend. They might just wander off to do something of their own, but they always return.’

‘Great,’ Sinbad said a little more confidently. ‘Now let’s just pray that we don’t get our heads cut off.’

The room began to fill with people, as Constantine sat on his throne, talking to his guards and Theos. His mother, Irene, stood glumly in the corner. She was a striking woman with golden locks and dressed to the nines.

Sinbad and Husayn stepped forward.

‘Oh, and here they are! The ones who saved me from the treacherous golem that has been plaguing the city and attacking me,’ Constantine loudly proclaimed. ‘The golem was created to kill me, as the Seid says, and I shall make sure I find out who’s behind these assassination attempts. Meanwhile’—he turned to his guests—‘thank you for your services. You shall be rewarded for this.’

Royal guards handed over bags of gold and jewels to Sinbad.

‘You aren’t giving me the tablet?’ Sinbad whispered to the king.

Constantine gave him a plastic smile. ‘You really thought I’d give up my entire history to an Arab? You have been rewarded well, so now be on your way.’

‘A deal is a deal.’

‘You killed the golem. You did not find the assassin.’

Sinbad smiled. ‘I know it’s *you*.’

‘What?’ the king scoffed. But Theos and Irene stepped forward to listen.

‘Don’t make me yell it, my friend. I know it’s you,’ Sinbad whispered. ‘You wanted to get a golem after you because you wanted your people to sympathize with you. No one likes you. No one wants you as their king. Victimizing yourself was the only option, you thought you had. And that led to your other plan—use the golem as an opportunity to blame it on the people around you and kill them.’ Sinbad winked at Theos and Irene. ‘But I ruined your plan. I came here and saved you and I knew all about the golem. I was a Seid, and you knew what that meant, no matter how dumb you play. You knew I’d catch on quickly, so you blamed it on others. You had to make it believable so you went with the plan of me taking you out in the open and pretended to be scared for your life, even though you knew it wouldn’t hurt a hair on your head. That’s why you ran to the hippodrome instead of the palace. You wanted *me* to see you as the victim. But I followed the golem back home and I met the rabbi you hired. Poor fellow was doing it all for the sake of his family. You had them imprisoned, no?’

Constantine was frozen to the spot, his pupils dilated. No words came out of him.

‘Now imagine if I reveal all of this, right now. Your popularity would plummet even further. They’ll just see you as a liar.’

‘I wanted to defeat the golem myself! First show defeat, then show resilience. I would have been a hero,’ Constantine finally said. ‘But you spoiled it. I was petrified, so I drank. And then I drunkenly promised you the tablet.’

‘Oh, how all the dots connect!’ Sinbad smiled. ‘So you’ll give me the tablet and I’ll be on my way?’

‘You’re lucky I’m not killing you. Leave and never speak of this again. Remember, I know where you come from.’

Sinbad had had enough of the child king. ‘Listen to me very carefully. The golem’s shem is in the process of being given to General Alexios. Once he has it and the letter on how to create a golem, it’ll be fun. And this time he’ll be the one to send you the golem who will willingly kill you.’

Constantine’s face drained of colour. ‘You’re bluffing.’

‘Am I? Give me the tablet and I’ll be on my way. In return I shall give you the location of the shem. You can take it before Alexios reaches it. You still have time.’

Constantine was furious, his eyes shooting daggers. The whole pretense of acting like a helpless, dumb child was gone.

‘All right. The tablet shall be delivered to your fleet. In secret,’ Constantine said through gritted teeth.

Sinbad cradled the bag of gold in one arm while he grabbed hold of the king’s hand with the other, raising it above their heads. ‘Long live the king!’

‘Long live the king!’ the courtiers shouted in return.

Sinbad looked at Irene. ‘I’m sure your patience will run out with him soon. Cheers.’

Sinbad and Husayn left for their ship. Husayn, brimming with nerves and excitement at that point, asked, ‘Did you really send the shem to the general?’

‘The idiot didn’t even ask me how I knew where the fugitive general is hiding.’

The two friends burst into a fit of laughter.

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THIRTY-NINE

Sinbad was in the captain’s lodge. The two wonderstones slotted together perfectly. Only one was left.

I have to get it.

His crew was in the room too, and they all looked at each other in awe. They were in open water now. Sinbad had finally covered all three places Anansi had told him about. He knew finding the last piece of the puzzle was something he had to figure out himself.

‘So we’ve done it,’ Sinbad said. ‘Just the last one left, though we have no idea where to look.’

‘I can find out,’ Pressa volunteered.

‘You should rest,’ Sinbad said, smiling at her. ‘We should all rest. Tomorrow, we start anew and figure it out. But thank you, everyone, for one hell of a journey.’

They all grinned and thumped each other’s backs.

They all left the room, chatting and laughing. All but one. She remained there, leaning against the door.

‘What happened?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said.

‘You don’t look all right.’ Her face was paler than usual and her cat eyes were swollen and puffy.

‘Do you remember the story of Calypso?’ she ventured.

‘Of course I do.’ He smiled fondly.

‘I always recall that day in the ship when you saved me from the island. I knew that I wanted to be safe.’ She smiled. ‘And you made me feel that way.’

‘Ah, well. Good memories.’ Sinbad sighed. ‘I’m sorry for being a brat. I should have been more considerate. You are a person, after all. You cannot just be obsessed with me all the time.’

Safeena nodded. She let out a sad laugh.

‘I should have known that you need to have a life outside of my own. I think this entire journey—I was thinking too much about myself. I should have thought about others more.’

He glanced at her, his heart beating faster when he locked eyes with her. The love of his life. The woman of his dreams.

‘I apologize too. I haven’t been easy. And I have reasons for that. Very strong ones, actually.’

‘I’d love to hear about it when you want to talk about it,’ he said. ‘It must have been hard to lose the one you love.’

‘He was my friend. My solace. My peace.’ She let out a small sob. ‘Iblis got to know. So he sent his henchmen one day. And another. And another. I stopped them and saved him many times. One day, I had a nightmare. I woke up to see a demon in front of me, ready to attack me, torment me, punish me for running away from my destiny. So I killed it . . . only for the illusion to shatter. It was my lover all along.’ She wiped away a tear, but more kept coming. ‘I was now blinded by the illusion of Iblis, and it petrified me. If the devil had so much power without being on Earth, what would happen if he were here? So I listened. Quietly. I did

what he told me because I didn’t want anyone else around me to get hurt. I though I could be smarter than him, but you never are. He’s always one step ahead of you.’

Sinbad clenched his jaw. ‘I understand.’

‘And when you saved me.’ Safeena was crying openly now, tears streaking her face. ‘I thought the gods of this world had given me another chance to find a happy life. But I realized that if I got too close to you, I might hurt you the same way I have hurt people in the past. I didn’t want to be close to anyone again, so I shut down. Trying not to be a problem or a distraction. I don’t want to be hurt again.’ She shook, sobbing. Sinbad wanted to comfort her, but he stayed where he was. She was independent—she knew how to wipe her tears. And she didn’t need him.

‘You could have told me that earlier.’

‘It’s been tough, Sinbad. I don’t know what to do or what not to. I just know Iblis needs to realize that he cannot escape his home. He stays there or he has to be defeated.’

‘I know.’ Sinbad nodded. ‘And we will do that. I have been running away from Sakhr. It’s time to fight back.’

‘That sounds like a good plan. But do you know where to start?’

Sinbad didn’t have to say anything, for the ship began to rock uncontrollably. They looked at each other in shock. The horns began to blow, and everyone was yelling. Sinbad and Safeena instantly launched themselves out, Sinbad grabbing hold of his overcoat, and made their way to the deck.

Pressa was screaming while looking ahead.

Huge tentacles were rising from the ocean. They had grabbed hold of his ship, wrapping the vessel, trapping them.

‘Did we just awaken the damn Kraken?’ Sinbad asked, shakily.

Before anyone could respond, he saw a ship sailing out the darkness, making its way towards them. An ancient ship made of skulls and bones.

And on top of it, Sakhr, merrily waving.

‘Why am I not surprised?’ mumbled Sinbad.

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FORTY

Sakhr poured himself some wine.

‘I gotta hand it to you. You did it, my friend,’ the demon smiled. ‘You want some?’

‘I rejected you the last time.’

Sinbad couldn’t do anything. The squid had trapped their ship in its tentacles. The fight was fruitless. Sinbad wasn’t tied down this time. He was in the captain’s lodge yet again, with most of his crew tied up and being watched by the red-haired woman.

‘You are quite a spoilsport. You should enjoy your victory. That’s what makes it fun,’ Sakhr said.

‘How do you know whenever we win?’

‘We have a spy.’

He remained stern. ‘No, you don’t.’

‘True.’ Sakhr shrugged. ‘I thought you would mistrust your friends, but you didn’t. Disappointed me. Those people can’t be on your side. They could backstab you whenever they get the chance.’

‘Oh, you would want that, wouldn’t you?’ Sinbad spat out.

The Admiral shook his head as he sipped his wine. ‘You think I want the worst for you. But I don’t. I want to help you.’

‘Don’t give me that nonsense. You tried to confuse me once, but you can’t now.’

He nodded, sitting in the captain’s chair. ‘Ah, it feels nice to be you for a change, right? Order everyone around. Shuffle through papers. Fun.’

‘What do you want?’

‘The Kraken had been asleep, but I woke him—he owed me a favour.’ Sakhr smirked. ‘He has helped me out. But the way I found about you was simple. The imps that your friend left behind, I just tortured them to follow you. Leading me to where you are. So you do the hard work, and I reap the rewards. Now if you hadn’t been able to take the stone, I would have had to storm the palace. Killing hundreds of people. Ah, so much casualty. The Byzantine Empire would have ceased to exist. But I chose not to. I’m not a monster, you know,’ he said, smiling. ‘I thought it would be best to just wait for you to play it smartly. So even though you couldn’t be part of my team, you were in a way.’

Sinbad was growing frustrated, but he knew showing any emotion would get Sakhr exactly what he wanted. ‘What is Iblis promising you? I can give you that.’

‘I don’t think you can.’ Sakhr chuckled.

‘Tell me.’

Sakhr pursed his lips. ‘Since you have been a good dog, I’ll let you in on a secret. I am not the bad guy. In fact, I’m one of the good ones. I was just promised some time with my daughter.’

‘I see.’

‘Yes. Being the Admiral kept me busy. I was too busy conquering fleets to spend time with her. Lost out on

watching her grow up. She wanted a simple life, the poor girl, a life where her parents would come back home in the evenings and have dinner and laugh with her, love her. But she died and so did everyone else.' His eyes turned soft. 'You know how she died? People killer. Humans. They burnt my family alive over some random argument. I was there too, visiting home after a long adventure. We all burnt. They all died and walked over to the other side. Except me.'

'Because of your karma?'

'Yes.' Sakhr nodded. 'I had performed some questionable deeds, so I did not get the pass to be with them in the afterlife. I was rejected and casted aside. I became a demon. A living demon.' He pulled back his coat to show Sinbad his burnt, withered foot. 'This is a testament to what happened, to what I have to achieve in order to get what I want.'

'You *want* death. You want to stop being a demon.'

Sakhr nodded. 'Iblis has promised me freedom from my existence, and I can be with my family again. I do not wish to turn the tides of destiny and bring them back. I just want to lay the way they laid and not suffer alone, in the tides of this terrible existence.'

'I think you got it wrong. He would never let his best admiral leave.' Sinbad looked at the demon in the eye.

'Probably. Or maybe, he will. With Iblis, there's always a catch. And the catch here is that I don't kill his daughter or any of you. I would have got rid of you a long time ago.'

'I don't understand. We are the ones who are stopping him from being released, so why would he want to help us out?'

He shook his head. 'Beats me. I could have drowned all of you the first time. But I was told not to. I wondered why.' He came closer, squaring himself next to Sinbad. 'He needs you for something. He needs your team. He knows all of you are

capable of something. He sees the potential, yes. And what that is, we'll probably know once he's out.'

'How do you plan to do that?'

'By finding the Water of Life, of course.' There was a glint in his eyes as he walked back to the table and pulled out the first wonderstone. He placed it next to the other two. 'It fits perfectly. And the moment I lock it into place with the others, I shall have the location of the tomb of Alexander.'

Sinbad looked anxious. 'How can some water save him?'

'It's a wish-granting potion. All one needs to do is take a sip and ask for something. Simple. I just have to drink it and bring my master back.'

'Or you can summon your family?' asked Sinbad cautiously.

His eyes lit up, but his voice remained steady. 'Oh, using my trick against me. Interesting. But I owe fealty to my master, and I shall be undeterred. Are you ready to make the trip?'

Sinbad sighed. He needed to do something to confuse the Admiral. 'Alexander could have had the Water of Life if he wanted to. He could have conquered the world. Become the undisputed ruler. But he knew the water was useless. A hoax. That's why he didn't actually drink the water. You are wasting time.'

'I know what you're trying to do, Sinbad. Alexander was one of the good guys,' Sakhr said, smiling. 'He hid the Water of Life that was gifted to him by—none other than Iblis himself.' The demon looked at Sinbad's shocked face. 'Yes, it was him, the Dark Lord. But Alexander realized that conquering the world was not worth it. Conquering love was . . . or something equally cheesy. Anyway, he let go of his campaign, and Iblis got angry. He had wanted Alexander to be his lieutenant, so he got him poisoned. Died on the

spot. But Alexander was smart enough to hide the water before he died. Iblis then forgot about it, didn’t think he needed it, until you spoilt his plan a few months ago.’

The Admiral didn’t waste time anymore. He connected all the stones together. A blinding light filled the room for a moment, before writings began to form on the tablets. They were coordinates of some kind.

Sakhr grinned gleefully. ‘Of course. I know where this is. It had to have been there. The heart of a civilization that died a horrible death because of its sins.’

‘Where?’ Sinbad couldn’t help but ask.

‘Oh, wouldn’t you like to know. Don’t worry, my friend. You and Safeena will be with me when it happens. I would like you to see my victory in front of me.’ Sakhr stepped out of the lodge and yelled to his men. ‘Prepare the portal for Iram of the Pillars.’ He turned back to Sinbad. ‘Or as it’s also called . . . the Atlantis of the Sands.’

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FORTY-ONE

Sinbad felt alone.

Though he was bound next to Safeena and this was the closest Sinbad had been to her in a while. They had finally made amends, and he was gathering the courage to tell her about what had happened with Anansi. After all, he had to figure out a way to escape what the spider demon had told him.

If his mission was successful, Safeena would forget him. He will cease to exist for her.

Sinbad didn't see anyone else, from his crew when the portal had opened up for the Atlantis of the Sands.

He had heard about the place. It was once a thriving, prosperous nation, but the sins of its citizens had led to its downfall. No one knew how an entire civilization just vanished completely one day, and soon it had been relegated to myths and legends.

Maybe the tomb of Alexander led to its demise, Sinbad thought. *They must have tried opening it one too many times.*

'I need to tell you something,' he said to Safeena.

In front of them was Sakhr. To the side stood the Nephilim, the Draugrs and the red-haired woman, who kneed him in the stomach. ‘Shut up. Or I will torture her more.’

Sinbad felt helpless.

The red-and-silver portal had opened up and Sakhr was stepping through it.

‘At least tell me where’s my crew?’ Sinbad sighed sadly.

‘Told you. They abandoned you,’ said the Admiral. ‘They were told to either stay with us or leave, and they chose to leave you and Safeena behind. Probably scampered off to chase the dreams they thought they could achieve without you.’

Sinbad couldn’t believe it. His crew would never leave him like this. He turned to Safeena, but her eyes were unfocused, as the bounds she was tied with had been charmed with spells that would repel her magical powers.

‘Isn’t it true, my dear, or am I lying?’ Sakhr asked Safeena. She glumly nodded, dazed.

Sinbad clenched his jaw. Families are supposed to stay with each other. His heart sunk.

‘Let’s leave. Before it’s too late. We are on our way to the discovery of a new land. The adventure will be quite something,’ Sakhr said happily.

He walked through the portal.

Sinbad and Safeena were prodded by blades to follow him. ‘Just walk. And don’t even think of trying to chit-chat.’

The moment Sinbad entered, his stomach tied itself into knots. He almost retched when he reached their destination.

They were right in the middle of a desert. Galloping winds and sand whipped around them. He could barely see anything but was pushed and prodded ahead, as Sakhr limped calmly, undeterred.

‘We are coming to the end of civilization as we speak,’ he said as he limped farther.

Sinbad and Safeena followed him in search of something meaningful, but only sand and dunes were seen, until Sinbad noticed the broken, dilapidated structures, domes and pillars. It was as if some terrible sandstorm had caused this destruction. The entire city was shattered. There was no sign of anything living. No souls. No people. Just isolation. A haunting spectacle.

‘The brink of civilization,’ Sakhr said. ‘We should adopt a new land, a new world now. It’s time we leave behind the old times and face the future ahead of us. We do not belong to the land that was given to us. We are the products and hybrids of strange fiends. We have corrupted ourselves, not showing any sign of improvement whatsoever.’

Sakhr moved towards a small dome-like ruin, half buried in the sand, that was like the entrance to a cave.

Sinbad pondered over the conversation he had with Sakhr.

Alexander wanted to get rid of the Water of Life . . . he never wanted to drink it. He knew what he would have been capable of if he drank it. Because power came with its twin —responsibility. And it’s important to know how much power one should wield.

They entered the cave, with Sakhr leading holding the glittering wonderstones. Soon they reached a clearing. There were multiple lanes, Sinbad assumed to be other entrances, branching from it. And in the middle, right in the centre of the clearing it was.

The tomb of Alexander.

It was lying right there.

Sinbad couldn’t believe how basic it was. It wasn’t ornate, as he had expected. No jewels or fancy writings proclaiming that a famous conqueror lay here. No one would have

suspected this of being the final resting place of a great king.

That was the point probably, thought Sinbad. For no one to know what it housed.

‘And we have completed our objective.’ Sakhr grinned. The demon didn’t wait or give one of his boring speeches. He just opened it. Unceremoniously. Sinbad wanted to see what was in it, but from where he stood, he could only see a skeletal hand. That hand was holding on to a flask. Sakhr ripped it away and scoffed at Alexander.

‘What a crusader of stupidity,’ he said, chuckling. ‘He could have been a god by now but chose not to. Wonder why.’

‘Probably because he didn’t see the point of it,’ Sinbad said.

Sakhr picked up a scroll that lay next to the body. ‘Or probably because he was in love.’

‘What?’

Sakhr walked to the red-haired woman and handed her the scroll. ‘Apparently his lover was dying. A Greek slave. If he chose immortality, he would have had to live without his loved one. He chose love. Not power. This was the last scroll he wrote as a testament to why he made this choice.’

‘Someone like you,’ Sinbad whispered.

Sakhr nodded. ‘He doesn’t sound that stupid after all.’

‘You could have all the power in the world, but what’s the point if you don’t have anyone to share it with?’ Sinbad said as he glanced at Safeena, who smiled back weakly. She hadn’t forgotten him yet. He still had time to tell her.

‘You may be right. But alas, my death awaits, and I shall be released. So thank you, Fatima.’ He looked at the red-haired woman. ‘Thank you for doing this for me. You have been the true servant of the devil.’

The flask was in his hand. He brought it closer to his mouth.

Sinbad wanted to shout, but before he could, a spear whizzed through the air and slammed into Sakhr's chest. He looked down as the flask fell from his hand and tumbled to the ground. The bottle which held the Water of Life just lay there.

'What in the name of . . .'

And at the entrance to each passageway appeared Ashrafiyah, Pressa, Idris, Markus and Husayn.

'Oh great, the dirty dozen is here.' Sakhr pulled the spear out from his chest absent-mindedly. 'You know, Iblis gave me the choice to kill you lot. It wasn't really an order to let you live. So technically I can get rid of you.' He looked at his army. 'Attack them.'

Sinbad saw the Draugrs and Nephilim march towards his friends. As they began to fight each of them, Pressa rushed up to them to open their bounds. She started with Sinbad and moved to Safeena.

'I used all my power to locate you. Luckily, I had your blanket that you had given me earlier, to trace you. It had your touch, so it made it easier for me to find you. We left to make them think we abandoned you and then returned with a surprise attack.'

'Good job.' Sinbad grinned as he was let loose. He saw that Sakhr was moving for his flask. Sinbad lurched forward and grabbed hold of it.

Sakhr used his cane as a weapon to attack Sinbad, who kicked Sakhr's knee. He fell, writhing in pain.

'You beast . . . you scum . . .' he growled. It was the first time Sinbad had seen him lose control.

'Look out, Sinbad!' Safeena called out. She was still bound —Pressa was being chased by a Nephilim.

Sinbad turned to see a doubled-edged sword coming his way. And a mass of flaming red hair. He grabbed the spear that Sakhr had pulled out of his body. Sinbad and Fatima sparred now. A fight to the death. She instantly went for his hand and slashed it. The flask fell.

Sakhr staggered to get hold of it, but before he could, Sinbad grabbed a handful of sand and threw it at Fatima's face.

She screamed, the fine sand blinding her. Sinbad pushed her to the ground, the spear close to her eyes.

'Don't even think about killing her,' Sakhr said, laughing, as he grabbed the flask and moved farther away from everyone.

'And why not?' Sinbad screamed.

Sakhr drank the Water of Life before saying, 'What kind of a son would kill their own mother?'

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FORTY-TWO

Sinbad was reeling.

Things were too complicated to comprehend.

Was it true that the red-haired woman, the devil's soldier, was his mother?

By this time, the crew had managed to kill most of the Nephilim and Draugrs, but they were all heavily wounded and exhausted. The fight had stopped as now the Admiral had succeeded.

Fatima stood next to Sakhr as he began to laugh uncontrollably.

'Have you made your wish?' Fatima asked, looking unaffected at the new revelation.

They all stood there in the silence now, except Sakhr who was smirking.

The ground began to shake, and the cave's rock walls began to crumble. Very soon they would all be buried in the ruins.

'We need to leave,' said Sinbad, urgently.

'Wha—?' Idris asked.

‘Because Iblis has risen. And he’s coming. You know what that means, right?’

He didn’t have to say anything, because as the rocks fell from the ceiling, a calamitic dark shadow had begun to penetrate around them. It surrounded them. A dense fog filled the cave. It seemed to consume the place. The shadow in front of them had begun to take a form now. Safeena knelt down in horror. A bald head, faceless, expressionless.

Sinbad’s supposed mother now knelt before the Dark Lord but Iblis stood there in silence.

The devil wore a cloak, the darkest of black in colour. He was, strangely, of average height. But there was something about his presence, his aura—enough to frighten the life out of people.

‘Are we going to fight him too?’ Markus asked, a shakily, his bloody hammer poised. ‘I’m all for it.’ He licked his lips.

Sinbad sighed, proud of his commander. But this wasn’t any demon.

It was *Iblis*.

‘My lord, I have done your bidding. Please release me.’

The figure looked at Sakhr. Without expression. He snapped his fingers and Sakhr vanished.

‘It’s too early for *you* to leave just yet.’ The voice penetrated everyone’s ears, but Iblis’s mouth didn’t even move. He floated over to Safeena. ‘My daughter . . . it’s been long.’ She didn’t react. It looked like she was hypnotized.

He looked at Fatima. ‘My servant, you have been loyal.’

‘Should we just leave this reunion?’ Husayn asked. ‘We could get killed, you know.’

Iblis had heard. He turned to face Sinbad. ‘Sinbad, it’s been a while. I hope to see you again. *Soon*.’

Sinbad wanted to say something, but his eyes were on Safeena. ‘Come,’ he mouthed.

Safeena didn’t flinch. She looked through him.

‘Why is she not coming?’ Idris asked. ‘What’s happened to her?’

Iblis extended his arms. Fatima and Safeena grabbed his hands and began to leave.

‘What is happening? Sinbad, do something . . .’

‘Why is she going with him?’

Because she doesn’t remember me. No . . .

Sinbad fell to his knees.

‘Boy, what have you done?’ Markus knew something was up.

Sinbad felt ashamed. He should not have lied. He should have told him the truth. He should have . . .

Anger began to bubble up within him, as he got up and grabbed hold of the spear and began to race towards Iblis, ready to attack.

When Iblis turned, his eyes gleamed red. He blinked.

Sinbad was lying on the ship’s cold, wooden deck. He couldn’t figure out what had just transpired. He was drenched. He heard the seagulls and felt the sun’s rays on his face. It was blinding him. As he turned his face from the sun, he saw he whole crew was there too.

‘Were we just . . . teleported?’ Idris asked.

‘I think so, yeah. With the blink of an eye,’ Husayn said. ‘It doesn’t take a Seid to know that who we are dealing with is someone far worse than we’ve ever encountered.’

Sinbad lay on the damaged deck, broken by the Kraken. Confusion and pain began mounting up inside him. He wanted to curl into a ball or run away as everyone neared him and started questioning him. He just wanted to be

alone. He wanted to listen to nothing but the seagulls. He wanted peace.

But there were so many questions.

Safeena didn't remember him anymore. Will she ever?

He always thought that his mother had died. Or had she? Was she the devil's soldier? On the side of evil?

He hadn't even been able to save Idris's husband.

And now . . .

Iblis had risen.

And Sinbad had no idea how to defeat him. His wit, which had always saved him, was of no use now.

He had lost.

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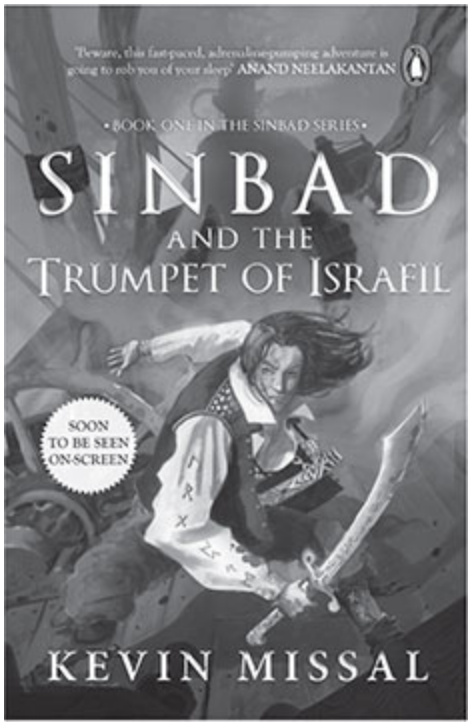
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